These Masks of Mine

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Dakota Frandsen

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1

Mundane

The quiet hum of the therapist's office lobby was punctuated only by the soft, classical music dThe soft, almost hypnotic murmur of a jazz melody drifted from a nearby radio, a pleasant counterpoint to the nervous energy humming beneath Jordan Lambert's skin. Dressed in somewhat casual attire—a worn but comfortable hoodie and faded jeans—he sat with his attention fixed on the vibrant dance of colorful fish in a nearby aquarium.

The aquatic ballet of neon tetras and angelfish, darting and weaving through miniature castles and swaying plastic kelp, offered a momentary escape from the anxieties that always seemed to accompany his therapy appointments. He traced the movements of a particularly flamboyant betta, its fins fanning out like a silken gown, when the jiggle and sharp click of a metal door latch broke his reverie.

His gaze snapped to the doorway, where Dr. Angela Martin, his therapist, stepped out, a warm, professional smile gracing her features as she prepared to greet him.

"Oh! Good morning, Jordan!" Angela's cheerful voice, a stark contrast to the quiet jazz, filled the air. "I wasn't expecting you so early. Traffic must have been unusually kind to you."

A nervous smile, almost a twitch, touched Jordan's lips. "Traffic was... favorable, for once. How are you, Dr. Martin?" He shifted slightly in his seat, the well-worn fabric doing little to quell the underlying agitation.

"I'm well, thank you," Angela replied, stepping aside with a welcoming gesture, indicating the open door to her office. "Eager to get started if you are. Please, come in." She held the door for him, her gaze gentle and inviting.

The plush couch in Dr. Martin's office, a rich, forest-green velvet that looked deceptively comfortable, offered little genuine comfort to Jordan. His nerves remained a live wire, humming beneath his skin, despite the soothing ambiance of the room. Across from him, Dr. Martin's smile was a warm, welcoming beacon, her eyes a steady, empathetic gaze that seemed to see right through his carefully constructed defenses.

"So, Jordan," she began, her voice gentle, yet with an undercurrent of focused purpose, "I happened to notice when

reviewing your file that we are coming up on two years since we started working together. Can you believe it's been that long? How do you feel about this milestone, and more importantly, how do you feel about everything that's happened during our sessions?"

Jordan attempted to deflect the remark with a feigned lightness, a practiced silliness that had served him well in countless difficult conversations. "Has it really been that long? Time flies when you're... well, in therapy, I guess." He offered a weak chuckle, hoping to sidestep the deeper implications of her question.

A knowing smirk played on Dr. Martin's lips, a clear sign that she saw right through his attempt at deflection. "Yes, it has indeed. And while time may fly, the progress you've made is undeniable. But I want to hear from you. How do you truly feel about our sessions and everything that's unfolded in your life since we began?"

He exhaled slowly, a deep, almost involuntary sigh that seemed to release a fraction of the tension he carried. "I feel... alright, I suppose. To be honest, I miss the adrenaline of the old life... the feeling that what I was doing was somehow making an impact, that I was actively shaping something." His voice trailed off, a hint of wistfulness in his tone.

Angela made a quick note in her files, her pen scratching softly against the paper, a rhythmic counterpoint to Jordan's

words. "That's completely understandable, Jordan. To go from the life you had as a bounty hunter, with its constant high stakes and clear sense of purpose, to struggling entrepreneur living back at home, trying to build something new from the ground up... that is not an easy shift for anyone, let alone someone with your background."

Jordan took a moment, a deep, cleansing breath that seemed to gather his thoughts. "Especially when it feels like that shift is becoming a burden to the already weak connections around you... like I'm dragging everyone down with me." His gaze drifted to a potted plant in the corner, avoiding eye contact, the admission heavy in the air.

Dr. Martin's smile widened, a subtle but significant shift, a sign that Jordan's psychological wall, usually so formidable and impenetrable, had finally begun to crumble, revealing a vulnerability he rarely displayed. "What exactly makes you say that, Jordan? What are these 'weak connections' you speak of, and why do you feel you're a burden?"

"It's probably old feelings coming up about the relationship between my mother and I," he admitted, his voice softer now, tinged with a familiar weariness, "especially with Paisley moving in. It's... complicated."

Dr. Martin tilted her head slightly, a flicker of genuine confusion crossing her face. "And who is Paisley? I don't believe

you've brought her up in any of our sessions before. Is she a new friend? A client?"

Jordan laid back on the therapy couch, settling deeper into its plush cushions as if seeking some physical comfort from the uncomfortable topic. "Not by name, at least. Paisley's my younger sister... well, half-sister, if that means anything." He added the last part almost as an afterthought, but it hung in the air, weighted with unspoken history.

Dr. Martin made another quick note, her pen poised briefly over the paper as she considered his words. "Why do you separate yourself from her like that, Jordan? By adding 'half-sister' as if it diminishes her significance or your connection?"

"Like what?" he retorted, a defensive edge creeping back into his voice, his gaze once again fixed on the ceiling.

"Usually, when someone doesn't mention a relative by name, or emphasizes a biological distinction like 'half-sister,' there are aspects of the relationship one doesn't want to acknowledge," she explained gently, her tone probing but nonjudgmental. "It often signals a deeper emotional rift or unresolved issues."

"You're not wrong," Jordan conceded, the defensiveness slowly receding. "Paisley, she was always treated like the favorite. Ma always seemed like she was eager to bail her out of

trouble, no matter what it was, but was quick to assume I was guilty of something... even when I wasn't around in the first place! It was like I was always the suspect, and she was always the innocent victim." The long-held frustration was palpable in his voice.

Dr. Martin jotted down a few more observations, her pen a blur against the page. "Based on what you're describing, Jordan, would you say there is significant resentment between you two? A deep-seated animosity?"

Jordan took a deep, shuddering breath, the weight of years of unresolved feelings pressing down on him. "Obviously. Even now, Mom is still bailing her out of trouble, pulling strings, and doing everything she can to smooth things over. Though this time, even I'd have to agree it's different. It's... bigger."

"How do you mean 'bigger'?" Dr. Martin prompted, leaning forward slightly, her full attention on him. "What's changed now that makes you feel this way?"

"Paisley's pregnant," Jordan stated, the words clipped and flat, devoid of emotion. "It's not just about her anymore. There's someone else involved now, someone completely innocent."

"Oh!" Dr. Martin exclaimed, a genuine warmth flooding her expression. "So you're going to be an uncle soon! That's exciting! That's wonderful news, Jordan."

A faint, almost imperceptible smirk touched Jordan's lips, a detail Dr. Martin didn't miss. It was fleeting, a ghost of a smile, but it was there.

"See?" she pressed gently, her voice gaining a touch of encouragement. "There's at least part of you that seems excited about this. Even with all the complicated history, this new development might be an opportunity for a different kind of connection, a fresh start."

Jordan chuckled, a genuine, unburdened sound. "Yeah, I guess I've always been a softy for the little ones."

"You were supposed to be a father, after all... it's only natural."

The mention of fatherhood brought a sudden tear to Jordan's eye. "Even before then. Which is why it honestly feels crazy that I'm about to admit this..."

"Admit what?"

Jordan sat up, meeting Dr. Martin's gaze directly. "I think I had one of those prophetic dreams about Paisley's baby. She's expecting a girl."

"What makes you say that?"

"Truthfully, it's just a feeling. If I remember correctly, she's due for a sonogram later, so we'll find out soon enough. It sounds like she tried to hide the baby's gender, or the fact she was expecting in the first place..."

Dr. Martin paused, adding more to her notes. "As long as the child's healthy, that's what matters."

Jordan nodded.

"While we're on that subject, do you feel that the news of Paisley's baby may be triggering lingering grievances of losing your own daughter? Perhaps, these critical feelings you have towards your sister are even stemmed from what was taken from you?"

Jordan sat up straighter, a flicker of confusion in his eyes at the notion Dr. Martin presented. "How do you mean?"

Dr. Martin tilted her head, expecting Jordan to grasp the connection she was drawing. "I mean, do you feel that your instinct to look after Paisley's child is a substitution for caring for Roselyn? A way for you to act on unfulfilled parental obligations that were taken from you the night Courtney passed away?"

A playful wink crossed Jordan's face. "You're getting to know me too well, Doc." He sighed, the lightness in his voice dissipating. "If I had to put a percentage, I'd say that's about sixty to seventy percent the reason..."

"And what would be the remaining?"

A glare crossed Jordan's face, revealing a deeper, more unexpected layer to his story. "The father has a history of pulling guns on people, heavy drinking, and went as far as to try framing Paisley for domestic terrorism..."

The news, as shocking and unbelievable as it seemed, visibly caught Dr. Martin's attention. She paused, surprised by the raw information. "Oh. Well, it's understandable that you might feel on edge because of that information."

Jordan nodded, shaking his head in a gesture of disbelief. "I wish I was exaggerating."

"It is understandable, and commendable that you would want to step up to help your sister under those circumstances..." Angela paused, a hesitation Jordan immediately noticed. "But, in the end, that is Paisley's problem to bear. For now, I feel like it's best to still focus on your well-being so you'll be mentally prepared to help without stressing yourself or the baby."

Jordan's eyes drifted towards the ground, a silent acknowledgment of mental defeat as he accepted Dr. Martin's statement. "You have a point. Where should we continue?"

"I want to talk about your dreams, particularly the ones about Courtney that seem to deeply affect you..."

Jordan froze, his sensitivity to the subject of his lost love as obvious as the sun in the sky. "What about them?"

"How about answering the question I left you with in our last session? What is it you feel they represent?"

Jordan paused, gathering his thoughts. "It really depends on the context of the situation..."

"How so?"

"There are times when Courtney's memory feels like the 'angel on my shoulder,' giving me advice or a confidence boost like she used to do. But in the same light, it's a brutal reminder that she's not there anymore... for any of the good or bad. As much as trying to hold on to those few moments, just to feel like she's still alive, it hurts..."

Jordan's eyes began to well up, and he struggled to compose himself. "But..." His tears became more frequent, tracing paths down his cheeks.

"What is it, Jordan?" Dr. Martin asked, her voice soft with concern.

He took a deep, shuddering breath. "It feels like even those memories are fading away..."

The scent of rich Italian spices mingled with the familiar hum of classic rock, a sound that had always grounded Jordan, even then. His memories of his lost love plagued him as readily as the air he breathed. But the grounding was fleeting.

The restaurant, a favored haunt for him and Courtney, shimmered as if viewed through heat haze, the edges of the familiar becoming soft and indistinct. He could hear the faint clink of plates and the murmur of small talk, but the details eluded him, a frustrating symptom of the fog that had settled in his mind after the trauma. He remembered it clearly, or as clearly as he could now.

Across the small, linen-draped table, Courtney sat, bathed in a soft, almost ethereal light. She was a vision in white, her dress flowing around her, a stark contrast to his own dark suit jacket and crimson dress shirt. As he looked at her, the lights behind her seemed to coalesce, forming the delicate, sweeping arch of angelic wings. It was a trick of the light, he knew, but in that moment, it was a perfect reflection of the adoration and profound love he had felt for her, a love that even the encroaching darkness of his fading memories couldn't dim.

Returning to reality, Jordan pondered the image in silence.

The flashback ended, leaving Jordan wiping his face, emotions raw from the memory. Dr. Martin sat back, observing his distress before speaking.

"There are a number of factors that can affect how we remember our dreams," Angela Martin began, her voice soft, "not all of them terrible. Sometimes it can be a lack of quality sleep, outside stress, or perhaps it can be viewed as a sign that these moments don't carry as much emotional significance. Courtney, the life you two were trying to build, there's no denying the significance of those precious memories. But perhaps, in this case, it's a sign that the grief you feel is losing its grip on you... rather than the happiness you felt becoming the memory? What do you think about that?"

Jordan reflected on Dr. Martin's insight. "I suppose that is a possibility..." he murmured.

"Of course it is," Angela affirmed. "I know your entrepreneurial efforts are one way of getting yourself out there... But have you given any consideration to getting out just for fun? Something other than just going to see a movie?"

The suggestion caused Jordan to shift his gaze, a memory of a past opportunity to "get out" surfacing. "Well, it has been a while. But there's one thing I've been a bit hesitant to do..."

Dr. Martin seemed surprised, a smirk playing on her lips. "Do share..."

"My buddy Brent has been hounding me about going out to a strip club, some place called Forgotten Desires," Jordan admitted. "I've been kinda deflecting on the idea, it's not my usual scene. I just left it that I needed to sort my schedule before I could say anything."

"Why don't you go, Jordan? I don't see you being the type to do anything that would harm yourself or others..." Angela prompted.

"Truthfully, it's more so Brent I'm concerned about."

"Now, correct if I'm wrong," Dr. Martin said, her brow furrowing, "but Brent is the friend who you mentioned had an engagement break off?"

Jordan nodded. "Yep. That's him, and honestly, he's still clinging on to her. It's been hard to share anything good in conversation because it seems to trigger him..."

"Normally, I'd advise you to be more empathetic... but our time together tells me there's more to your obvious concerns..."

Jordan took a deep breath, clearly worrying about his friend. "Believe me, I'm trying. Even when the separation hap-

pened, I tried, even though it was hard. He's my best friend, been that way since we met in high school and I was supposed to fulfill my end of our pact to be each other's best man... Even with the separation centering on the fact Brent couldn't put down the game controller, I tried to be supportive... But... Dr. Martin... he's using..."

Jordan's fears, finally articulated, gave Dr. Martin pause as she considered an appropriate response.

"I remember us discussing the separation... but when did you find out he was using? What's his drug of choice?" Angela inquired.

Jordan sighed. "Just last week he admitted it, when I decided to reach out on social media just to chat. As for his 'poison,' it seems like it's heroin and alcohol..."

"I see. That is concerning. But, maybe, spending time with someone like you could do him some good!" Angela suggested. "Just talking online can only show so much, Jordan, it may do you and Brent some good to just get out together and see how the other is evolving. It may even reveal something about yourself..."

"I guess I could go... couldn't hurt to do something a bit different, I guess."

"In the end, it's up to you," Angela concluded. "It might not seem conventional but, think of it like a middle ground. That way, you might be able to see a better way to help your friend!"

"I suppose you have a point there. It's better than finding him dead in his apartment with a needle sticking out his arm..."

Dr. Martin tilted her head. "It's understandable you worry about your friend. But it's been two years, time to spread your wings a little..."

Dr. Martin glanced at her clock as Jordan visibly pondered her advice. She looked to the side, an idea forming to potentially help him further.

"Jordan, do you journal?" Angela Martin asked, her voice a gentle inquiry.

Jordan Lambert, initially confused, replied, "Sometimes, why?"

"I think you might benefit from something new my office is starting to offer," Angela explained. "I'll be honest, I'm still trying to learn how to use it myself, but... I think someone like you could benefit. Perhaps, even with your technical expertise, you might be able to help me better use it."

Jordan's eyes, previously clouded with confusion, shifted to intrigue. "Sure, I'll help where I can. What is it?"

"There's a new app that's supposed to allow us to better connect, by letting you journal or message me directly," Angela revealed. "It seemed like a good way to allow certain patients of mine a way to better express themselves. Would this be something of interest to you?"

"I'd be willing to try it!" Jordan exclaimed, already digging out his phone to download the app. Dr. Martin stopped him.

"I'll send you the link in an email once we are done here. The app is still in testing..."

Jordan nodded, glancing towards his phone as he noticed a text message come through.

"Is everything alright?" Angela asked, noticing his shift in attention.

Jordan opened his phone and read the message, a surprised expression on his face. "Oh, yeah, it's actually from Brent. Talk about timing..."

"Really? What does he want?" Angela pressed.

"He's saying that he's got a surprise for me if I say 'yes' to going out..."

"Why don't you answer him? He's clearly wanting your attention."

Jordan glanced towards Dr. Martin and nodded, opening the message to reply. "Hey dude, I think I'll take you up on that offer. Let me know what time you want to meet up..." He sent the message.

"How do you feel?" Angela inquired.

Jordan nodded, trying to maintain a positive front. "I feel good, a little excited! Maybe I'm... overthinking."

Dr. Martin smiled. "As frustrating as it may be, you're actually doing quite well. But while we have a few more minutes, do you have any questions? Any plans for the day?"

Jordan shrugged. "Mainly, I was going to work on my website. But, we shall see..."

2

Whispers

Later, in Jordan's combination bedroom and office, the soft, rhythmic click of his keyboard filled the air, punctuated by the occasional whir of his computer's fan. He hunched over the glowing monitor, its cool blue light casting a focused intensity on his face, illuminating the subtle shadows under his eyes.

The room was a familiar jumble of his life, a testament to his often-blurred lines between work and leisure. His home office was less a dedicated space and more an organic overflow of his existence, crammed into a corner of his bedroom. Bookshelves, groaning under the weight of meticulously organized DVDs and a handful of well-worn, cherished video games, lined one wall.

His smart TV, usually reserved for the immersive worlds of movies and gaming, sat almost as an afterthought beside his main monitor, silently acting as a secondary display for research or a quick check of news feeds. Empty coffee mugs, a

few stray pens, and a crumpled snack wrapper littered the surface of his desk, each item a silent witness to hours spent lost in the digital realm.

A sudden, warm thump in his lap made Jordan jump, a jolt of surprise that quickly melted into a soft, affectionate smile. His ginger tabby, a magnificent ball of fluffy orange fur, had gracefully landed, settling its considerable weight with a contented sigh. Instinctively, Jordan reached out, his fingers finding the familiar spot behind its ears, eliciting a rumbling purr that vibrated through his thighs. He pulled the purring animal closer, burying his face for a moment in its soft fur, the scent of catnip and comfort a welcome distraction.

A figure materialized in the doorway, framed by the dim light of the hallway. It was a woman who, with her youthful features and remarkably smooth skin, looked too young to be a mother of adult children. Yet, Sheryl Miller was exactly that—Jordan's mother and, by arrangement, his landlord. Her disheveled pajamas, a soft, faded cotton, hinted at a recent, perhaps reluctant, escape from bed. This was a common sight, given her demanding night shift work, which often left her sleep schedule in disarray.

"Hey, how was your appointment?" Sheryl's voice was a low, tired murmur, carrying a faint echo of the lingering tension that often permeated their conversations. While she had been a constant, unwavering presence after Jordan lost his family, a silent anchor in his grief, unspoken conflicts between

them often frayed the edges of their daily small talk, like loose threads on a well-worn tapestry.

Jordan hesitated, his eyes still fixed on the scrolling text on his screen, a digital shield between them. "It was fine... I'll probably be heading out later." His tone was clipped, almost dismissive, a subtle barrier he often erected when confronted with personal questions.

"Oh, where are you going?" Sheryl's surprise was evident in the slight rise of her voice, and Jordan visibly stiffened. A faint line creased his brow, a clear sign of his annoyance at the unexpected interrogation.

"Still waiting to find out. Brent's apparently wanting to meet up..." He trailed off, his gaze drifting to a corner of the room as if searching for an escape.

Sheryl paused, a flicker of concern crossing her face, softening her features. She was acutely aware of Brent's ongoing struggles, his battles with his own demons. "Oh, really? How has he been?" Her voice was gentler now, laced with genuine empathy.

Jordan shook his head slowly, a deep sigh escaping his lips, a silent testament to the weariness of the situation. The cat, sensing the shift in his mood, kneaded its paws rhythmically on his lap, a comforting presence.

"Still, huh?" Sheryl's tone shifted, a subtle, almost imperceptible hint of passive aggression creeping in, a familiar undertone in their exchanges. "At least you're getting out of the house more..." Her words were meant to be encouraging, perhaps, but they landed with the subtle sting of an accusation.

A sudden, sharp thud from the other room—the unmistakable sound of the front door shutting—snapped both Sheryl and Jordan's attention away from their strained conversation. Jordan's cat, startled by the unexpected noise, twitched its ears, its head swiveling towards the sound.

A younger woman, Paisley Miller, Jordan's younger sister, entered the room, her movements fluid and purposeful. Her face, though young, carried the distinct, almost tangible weight of impending single motherhood, a quiet determination etched into her features.

"Hey, babe, how was the doctor?" Sheryl's voice brightened considerably, the weariness from moments before seemingly evaporating as she turned her attention to her daughter.

Paisley, her hands clasped in front of her, seemed to vibrate with a nervous energy, a barely suppressed excitement. "Well, everything's looking good." She held up a finger to Sheryl, a silent, almost imperious command for silence, and walked purposefully to Jordan’s doorway, her gaze fixed on him with an almost unnerving intensity. Her expression hardened,

though a faint, mischievous smile played on her lips, hinting at the playful confrontation to come.

"Now before you say anything," she began, her voice firm, "shut up so I can talk."

Jordan smirked, a familiar sign of their playful sibling rivalry, a silent acknowledgment of her theatrical entrance. He leaned back in his chair, anticipating her revelation.

"Shut it!" Paisley exclaimed, a hint of genuine annoyance now mingling with her playful exasperation. Her eyes sparkled with a mixture of triumph and anticipation. "You were right, it's a girl..."

Jordan rose from his chair, his smile widening into a full-blown grin, a rare sight these days. He pulled Paisley into a tight, spontaneous hug. She squirmed, uncomfortable with the unexpected embrace, anticipating a sarcastic remark, a witty jab, a typical Jordan response. But in that moment, the embrace triggered something deeper within him, a forgotten memory bubbling to the surface like a long-lost treasure.

A brilliant, almost blinding, light filled the hospital room, a stark, almost painful contrast to the blurred, indistinct edges of Jordan's fading memory. It was Courtney, her image as indistinct as a dream, a beautiful phantom, but the feeling of being with her during that first sonogram was vivid, almost painfully real. He remembered the soft, nervous melody of

her singing, a private serenade on the examination table, her voice a gentle hum as the nurse moved the cold, gel-covered wand over her swollen stomach. Her eyes, wide with a mixture of excitement and trepidation, were fixed on the screen, mirroring his own anticipation.

"Alright, Miss Freeman," the nurse's voice was gentle, professional, a calm anchor in the swirling emotions of the room. "The baby is looking good, coming along nicely! Would you two like to know the gender?" Her smile was kind, her gaze flitting between them, sensing their shared eagerness.

Courtney's voice, though a little shaky with anticipation, was clear, unwavering. "Yes, of course." Her hand instinctively reached for Jordan's, their fingers intertwining, a silent promise.

Moments stretched, filled with the soft, almost imperceptible whir of the machine and the rhythmic thrum of their own heartbeats, a synchronized symphony of life. The nurse repositioned the wand, her face etched with focused intensity, her eyes narrowed as she studied the grayscale image on the screen.

Then, a quiet revelation, spoken with a soft, knowing smile: "It's a girl!"

Jordan was on his feet in an instant, a wave of overwhelming emotion washing over him, a tsunami of joy and disbelief.

He pulled Courtney into a tight, possessive embrace, the world narrowing to just the two of them, their shared excitement a palpable force in the sterile room. And then, just as quickly as it had arrived, the memory dissolved, fading back into the recesses of his mind, leaving behind a lingering ache.

A quiet, choked sob escaped Jordan as he clutched his sister tighter, a few errant tears, unexpected and unwelcome, escaping the corners of his eyes, tracing hot paths down his cheeks. "I told you so," he whispered, a small, wet wink accompanying the words, a desperate attempt to inject a semblance of normalcy into the emotional moment. Paisley merely waved him off, a familiar gesture of dismissal, already retreating to her room, her face bathed in the soft, ethereal glow of her smartphone, a silent escape back into her own world.

Jordan shook his head, a faint smile playing on his lips, until the familiar chime of his cell phone pierced the silence. Brent Harmon's name, emblazoned across the caller ID, brought an immediate lift to his spirits. He swiped to answer, wiping his face as Sheryl, his mother, slipped away to prepare for her shift as a police dispatcher.

"Yo!" Jordan's voice boomed into the phone, the last vestiges of his earlier sadness dissolving.

"Dude! So, did your therapist finally convince you to say yes to me?" Brent's voice crackled with an infectious energy.

Jordan rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. So what the hell is this surprise you keep grilling me about?"

A hearty laugh echoed through the phone. "No, no! You're not getting it out of me, dude! You're gonna have to see for yourself!"

Just then, the bedroom light flickered, Sheryl's silent cue. Jordan, visibly irritated, shook his head. Sheryl, in a theatrical display of frustration, flipped him off.

"I gotta go, brother," Jordan said into the phone, his voice tinged with exasperation. "Nine o'clock, right?"

"I hear ya. See you at nine." Brent's voice faded as Jordan ended the call, tossing his phone onto his bed before glaring at his mother.

"Well, fuck me then for asking a question..." Sheryl mumbled, almost to herself, as she walked away. Jordan's fists tightened, but he steadily calmed himself.

"Not like you'll listen, but be careful," Sheryl called out, a hint of concern in her voice. "Cops are out heavy tonight."

Jordan raised an eyebrow. "Needing to meet yearly quotas to get grant money again? I'm sure you can get something together at dispatch."

Sheryl, already engrossed in her hair, held a brush in her mouth as she secured a ponytail. She moved into the bathroom across from Jordan's room, her voice muffled as she sighed. "The calls coming in say something else... Just be careful, okay? I hate seeing your number on my board."

Jordan braced his arm on the door frame. "You are in the wrong profession to doubt the lengths of human stupidity... especially for someone in Brent's state of mind..."

Meanwhile, in Brent Harmon's apartment, moments later, the scene was a chaotic testament to his current state of mind. He navigated a literal maze of spilled food stains, dust, and tossed clothes, setting his phone down on a counter practically buried under a collection of empty alcohol bottles.

An end table held a tear and alcohol-stained framed photo: Brent, embraced by a beautiful blonde woman—his ex-fiancée, Kayla. The source of his separation, still a raw wound, as he collapsed onto the only clean space in his living room—his gaming setup. He donned his headset, powered on the console, and immersed himself in a first-person shooter, the digital world momentarily eclipsing his reality.

The series of gunfire and grenade explosions drown Brent into the virtual warzone, unaware of the brewing true battles about to emerge much later in the evening.

3

Screams

Jordan sat hunched in the worn seat of an old pickup truck, the faded upholstery doing little to absorb the discomfort of his business casual attire. A crisp, button-down shirt and tailored slacks felt as out of place on him as a tuxedo in a junkyard. His eyes, sharp and restless, tirelessly scoured the growing throngs of people arriving at the club. It was an involuntary twitch, a ghost of his past life as an operative that stubbornly clung to him despite his desperate desire to shed it. He pulled out his phone, calling Brent, only to be met with the immediate, disappointing click of voicemail.

"Yo! Brent! Where the heck are you, dude? I'm at the strip club and about to leave if I don't see any sign of you soon." Jordan hung up with a heavy sigh, trying in vain to muster a semblance of positive anticipation for the evening. He remembered an app Dr. Martin had mentioned off-camera, a digital journal, and pulled it up, hoping to fill the empty moments.

He opened his journal. *Where do I even begin? I guess with the news about Paisley's baby; it's kind of bittersweet. The thought of Paisley becoming a mother scares me a bit, knowing what she's like. Since the dream I had about the baby as a little girl, I feel really protective of her. Especially knowing what the father of the kid is like... a proper jackass even Nuns would want to dropkick. She's my sister, after all.*

He continued his entry, fingers flying across the virtual keyboard. *Maybe the dream means my niece and I will be close, and maybe the usual trouble I've had with people close to me will finally end. I hope I'm wrong about Paisley and that she'll step up. She has a tough road ahead, and I'm willing to help where I can. I'm actually a little excited, especially since the dream seems to have been true – it's a girl. My sister was almost too eager to admit I was right, haha. It's been a while since we just acted like siblings...*

Anyway, I'm writing this while waiting outside the club. Brent, as usual, he's late. If this wasn't normal for him, I would've left already. But, with everything going on, it's been a long time since we hung out like we used to, before life got so complicated. I tried to figure out his surprise for me, but he's too good at spotting when I'm trying to trick him. Well, I'm here, so I might as well try to have some fun. This isn't really my kind of place, and I thought Brent felt the same way. Guess we'll see. I'm not planning to drink; I'll just use the designated driver excuse, just in case I need to stay alert. I hate feeling this on edge...

Jordan sent the journal entry, the screen dimming as he climbed out of his truck, his gaze already fixed on the neon-lit entrance of the club. Just as he took a step, a blur of bright red roared into the parking lot, the screech of tires nearly ending his night prematurely. Jordan leaped back, a cold dread washing over him until the driver's side window whirred down, revealing the grinning face of Brent. Two other men, dressed in the ubiquitous baggy clothes favored by those who sought to blend into the urban landscape, emerged from the car with Brent. Unaware of the unexpected company, Jordan's inner alarms, usually so finely tuned, were momentarily muffled by the familiar, playful banter.

"Brent! You have friends!" Jordan joked, a smirk playing on his lips.

Brent's response was a swift flip of the bird, but his arm extended in a gesture of bro-hug camaraderie before he introduced his companions: Chris Mule and Tyler Laverty.

"Hey! We all went to school together! But this is Chris and Tyler."

"Nice to meet ya, big man!" Chris Mule said, his voice a low rumble.

Tyler Laverty, on the other hand, practically shouted with excitement, "Are we just gonna stand here jerking each other off? Or we gonna see some girls!"

"Let's get this over with," Jordan teased, his gaze lingering on Tyler's glasses. "You don't exactly look like your exes could actually see!"

The guys erupted in a chorus of playful hollering at the joke, the laughter a welcome distraction that allowed Jordan to mask the burgeoning sense of impending trouble that had begun to simmer within him.

The pulsing bass of the strip club vibrated through the floor, a constant, low thrum against Jordan's back as he settled into the booth. From his vantage point against the wall, he could take in the entire room, a kaleidoscopic blur of flashing lights and shadowed figures. But his gaze wasn't on the scantily clad waitresses or the dancers undulating under the spotlights. Jordan's attention was fixed on the other patrons, particularly the older men at the bar, their hands already straying, drunkenly grabbing at the passing waitresses. He watched their postures grow more aggressive, a familiar tightening in his chest, a knot of unease coiling in his gut.

He brought his soda glass to his lips, the cool condensation a small comfort against his palm. Then he saw it: a sharp slap, the sound lost in the club's din, but the impact clear. The waitress recoiled, her face contorted in a grimace of pain and humiliation. Jordan's grip tightened, the outer layer of the glass cracking under the sudden pressure, a spiderweb of fissures spreading across the surface.

A fierce, primal urge, born of frustration and a twisted sense of justice, urged him to shatter the cup across the man's face. He began to shift, his muscles coiling, ready to act. But then a bouncer, a hulking silhouette against the flickering lights, intervened, swiftly escorting the belligerent man out, the incident resolved before Jordan could fully unleash the simmering fury within him. He released the glass, the faint crackle of ice a stark contrast to the thumping bass, and took a slow, deliberate breath, forcing himself to relax. The tension remained, however, a persistent hum beneath his skin.

His attention diverted, Jordan heard Brent's voice cut through the noise. He saw his friend lean in, whispering to a waitress, a crisp fifty-dollar bill disappearing into her hand. As she walked away, Brent waved, trying to catch his eye.

"Hey! Jordan! You with me, man?" Brent's voice was a little strained, fighting the music.

Jordan took a deep breath, composing himself, the adrenaline slowly receding. He acknowledged Brent's effort. "I'm here, I'm here..." he sighed, the words barely audible over the beat.

Brent leaned in closer. "You sure? You don't seem like you're enjoying yourself."

Jordan met his gaze, the club's chaos a stark contrast to the quiet unease in his own mind. "It's just been a while since I've really been out."

"I know. Trust me, it was hard to try getting out after I lost Kayla."

Jordan's eyebrow arched, a silent question.

"Okay... I know!" Brent held up his hands in surrender. "I heard enough from my family about how much I screwed up with her."

Jordan nodded, a shared understanding passing between them. "Yeah, I remember, dude. It was hard to try helping you out..."

Brent reached across the table, patting Jordan's shoulder. He swallowed hard. "I know. But, still, you were there for me, and I want to return the favor."

Jordan instinctively recoiled, pushing back into his seat. "How the hell can you help me?"

"That's the surprise, my friend." Brent scooted closer, his voice dropping to a near whisper as a new dancer took the stage, the electronic music swelling. "If I lost Kayla like you lost Courtney, I probably would have killed myself." His voice grew more earnest, battling the growing volume. "You've got

to be the strongest man I know, but Jordan, it's time to move on."

Chris, catching snippets of the conversation, leaned in, trying to make himself heard over the din. Tyler, however, remained oblivious, lost in the vibrant glow of the dancer's lingerie.

"I know it's not my place," Chris shouted, "but I heard about what happened to you on the news. It's rough, man."

Brent gave Chris a quick nod before refocusing on Jordan. "You want to know my surprise?"

A cold dread began to coil in Jordan's stomach. The PTSD, a constant shadow, was clawing at him, the phantom sensations of his worst nightmare threatening to overwhelm him. He tried desperately to suppress the rising panic.

Brent leaned in even closer, his voice a conspiratorial whisper against Jordan's ear. "What if I could give you one more night with Courtney?"

Jordan's eyes widened, his heart rate leaping, the frantic thump echoing in his ears. "What the hell are you talking about?" he managed, his voice visibly disturbed.

"I bought you a dance... you'll see what I'm talking about."

Chris tapped Tyler's arm, pulling him from his daze.

"What's going on?" Tyler asked, his confusion evident.

Chris and Brent ignored him, their attention fixed on Jordan.

"Trust me, man, you're not gonna believe what's here until you say 'yes'," Brent urged.

Tyler, finally piecing together the hushed exchange, joined Chris and Brent, the three of them forming a wall of insistent noise, their collective pressure overwhelming Jordan.

"Alright!" Jordan shouted, his voice cracking.

A cheer erupted from his friends as two blonde waitresses, clad in bikinis, approached. They blindfolded Jordan, the sudden darkness intensifying his disorientation, and led him towards a back room.

"You'll thank me later, buddy!" Brent's voice, a triumphant shout, was the last thing Jordan heard as he was led away.

Jordan was carefully led to a bench in a curtain-sealed room at the back of the club. His breathing was ragged, each step a conscious effort to calm the rising panic within him.

The waitresses, their voices soft whispers, guided him to the seat. One of them leaned down, her lips brushing his ear. "Have a good time, sweetie..." she purred, and then he was alone.

Blindfolded, Jordan struggled to process his surroundings, fighting to avoid losing control as he took in each breath. The air hung heavy with the scent of cheap perfume and stale smoke.

A woman entered through the curtains, her form silhouetted. Mila Sabirova, though her face remained unseen, her posture spoke volumes. Draped in black lace lingerie that clung to her curves, she moved with a visible disdain for her work. Yet, as she approached the blindfolded Jordan, a fake, sing-song flirtatious tone replaced her inner turmoil. Her steps were exaggerated, a deliberate sway to every movement. A faint Eastern European accent hinted at her origins. Her fingers brushed against his skin, a soft touch that sent a jolt through him, as she reached to remove the blindfold.

She leaned close, her whisper a husky invitation. "Are you ready, big boy?"

The blindfold came off, revealing Mila's face mere inches from his. The sight ripped through Jordan, triggering a vivid flashback.

He was back in Riverside Park, a cherished memory now ethereal, yet crystal clear. The gentle murmur of the river and the cheerful song of birds filled the air. Jordan sat on a hill, Courtney in his lap, her face a soft blur as she gazed into his eyes. The moment was tender, a silence that spoke volumes. Courtney leaned close, her voice a whispered promise. "Remember this moment, our lives will never be the same."

Then, her image sharpened. Courtney Freeman, a beautiful brunette with pronounced cheekbones and chin, skin soft, lips even softer. That image, burned into Jordan's mind, mirrored in the brief smile that touched his lips.

The scene snapped back to the present, a close-up on Mila's face. It was a one-in-a-billion chance encounter. Mila, a beautiful brunette with pronounced cheekbones and chin, with the softest skin and lips—an almost exact replica of Courtney. They could have been sisters, were it not for Mila's faint accent. The sight overwhelmed Jordan, as if the ghost of the woman he loved had returned to torment him.

His breathing quickened, PTSD seizing him. Mila, oblivious, began to sway as music cued, ready to dance, but then she registered his distress. "Sir, are you... well?" she asked, a worried note in her voice.

Jordan, barely able to focus, tried to steady himself, but the feeling of being overwhelmed consumed him. "I need to leave, please..." he stammered, his voice laced with panic.

Mila backed away, understanding dawning on her. Still, she tried to help. "It's okay, just take deep breaths, please. You're scaring me."

Tears welled in Jordan's eyes. "I'm sorry. I just... really need to go now. I'm sorry..." He scrambled to his feet, hurrying out of the back room, even the bouncer from earlier looking at him with concern.

Jordan gasped, a suffocating weight pressing down on him. The main room of the strip club spun, the pulsing lights blurring into a dizzying haze. He had to get out. He lunged for the exit, only to be cut off by Brent, Chris, and Tyler, their drunken laughter grating on his raw nerves.

"What the heck?! Don't you like my surprise?!" Brent slurred, swaying slightly.

Tyler guffawed. "I told you guys he wouldn't last!"

Their taunts were like fuel to the inferno raging inside him, the pressure building until he felt like a caged animal. All he could hear was the frantic thump of his own pulse, echoing the chaos within.

Mila emerged from the back, her gaze searching for him, but before she could reach him, three hulking men, dressed in worn leather and looking every inch the bikers they were,

surrounded her. They grabbed her wrists, their grip like iron manacles. Mila fought back, a desperate flurry of kicks and shoves, until one of them slammed her against the wall, tearing at her clothes.

The bouncer, the same one who'd tried to stop him earlier, stepped in, but was quickly subdued, a powerful blow to the head sending him sprawling. Mila's scream, a raw, piercing sound, was abruptly stifled.

That was it. The trigger. The snap.

Jordan's mental state shattered, his eyes chilling to a calculated, icy blue. His breathing became so steady, so shallow, it seemed he wasn't breathing at all. The very air around him shimmered, bending like a desert mirage.

Brent, surprisingly, sobered almost instantly. "Jordan. Jordan! Don't do it!" he shouted, a tremor in his voice as Jordan turned his gaze towards the bikers tormenting Mila.

Jordan moved. He grabbed a nearby beer bottle, the cool glass a sudden weight in his hand. The first biker, alerted by Brent's shout, swung wildly, but Jordan was faster. He grabbed the arm, twisting, and a sickening crack echoed through the room. The biker screamed, his arm dislocated, before Jordan brought the bottle down, rendering him unconscious.

He moved to the next, who had already pulled a knife. The second biker lunged, the blade flashing, but Jordan dodged, a blur of motion, and slammed the bottle into the back of his head. He crumpled, the knife falling from his grasp, impaling him in the stomach as he hit the floor.

The third biker, pants around his ankles, finally registered the unfolding nightmare. Seeing his friends dispatched with such brutal efficiency, he scrambled backwards into a corner, hands raised in surrender.

"Please, it was just a joke!" he begged, his voice high-pitched with terror.

Jordan flipped the bottle, gripping it by the base. He forced it into the last biker's mouth, a sickening crunch of bone and teeth as the jaw dislocated. The man choked, struggling for breath, as Jordan hoisted him up and slammed his face into the nearby wall before throwing him on top of the other two bikers, a heap of unconscious flesh.

Still cold, still focused, Jordan scanned the room. Everyone was frozen, paralyzed by fear. He began to calm, the raw adrenaline slowly receding, replaced by a dull ache in his stomach. He saw Mila, curled in on herself, trying to cover her exposed skin.

Guilt, hot and bitter, washed over him. He ripped a curtain from a nearby doorway, its velvet heavy in his hands, and

used it to cover Mila. Tears stung his eyes. The ghost of the woman he'd lost, the one he'd failed, seemed to flicker before him, now afraid of *him*. The sight tore at his soul.

"I'm so sorry for this..." he whispered, the words barely audible.

He wiped his eyes, the tears mixing with the sweat on his face, and ran. Out of the club. Out into the night.

The wails of distant sirens and busy city streets filled the air as Jordan ran for his escape. In a moment of overwhelming guilt, he slammed the back of his head against his truck's cold metal as the weight of his actions crushed him to the ground, the dull thud echoing the agony in his chest. He crumpled into a ball, biting down on his lip until he tasted blood, a desperate attempt to contain the torrent of frustration raging within him.

"Son of a bitch. Not again. Not like this!" he muttered, the words choked and raw.

He tried to calm the tremor in his hands, the frantic beat of his heart, but the emotion clung to him like a shroud. With no other recourse, he fumbled for his smartphone, dialing Dr. Martin, fully expecting the comfort of voicemail.

A calm, professional voice greeted him. "This is Doctor Angela Martin. Please leave your name and the nature of your

call after the tone, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can." A sharp beep signaled him to speak.

"Hey Dr. Martin, it's Jordan Lambert," he began, his voice raspy and rattled. "I messed up. I lost control at the nightclub and... I hurt some bikers. Bad."

He took a ragged breath, trying to steady himself. "Brent's surprise at the club... there was this dancer who looked just like Courtney!" His voice cracked. "Not just a passing glance, they could've been sisters. When I saw her, I just couldn't focus. I had to leave."

A nervous chuckle escaped him, devoid of humor. "She was sweet too. She saw something was wrong and tried to help me... but I just had to leave." His words came through gritted teeth now. "Then that fucking idiot... Brent... he blocked me from the exit. He and these two other punk asses... Chris and Tyler, I think their names were."

Another deep breath, as if to physically push down the rising fury. "Those morons blocked me when I tried to leave. Apparently, the dancer was coming to check on me, but then the bikers cornered her. The bouncer was knocked out, and they tore her clothes... she tried to scream... that's what set me off."

The memory unleashed a fresh wave of nausea. "I beat all three of them unconscious with a beer bottle that was nearby. The third one tried begging for mercy, saying it was a joke...

so I slammed the bottle down his throat and beat him the worst..." Choking on unshed tears, he whispered, "I'm... I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

He took a shuddering breath. "Then... I realized the girl watched me... it may as well have been like I'd hurt Courtney. And no... no, I didn't hurt the girl. Scared her, without a doubt... but I just grabbed a curtain to cover her up and left."

The distant wail of police sirens pierced the night, pulling Jordan back to the present. "I better go," he mumbled into the phone. "Sounds like police are on their way and they'll probably need my statement. It'll be just my luck if I don't end up in jail tonight. If only I could just win the lottery and disappear."

He ended the message, sliding the phone into his pocket. He stood, smoothing down his clothes, attempting to reclaim some semblance of composure before settling against the hood of his truck, arms folded, waiting for the inevitable.

Red and blue lights danced across his face, and with them came another memory, the deepest scar on his soul.

The world blurred, the air thick with the acrid scent of smoke and something else, something metallic. Jordan, clad in a black beanie, dark clothes, and a bulletproof vest, a "Fugitive Recovery Agent" badge swinging from his neck, burst from

his old car. He raced towards a police barricade, but officers materialized, holding him back, their grips unyielding.

"Let me go! That's my house!" he roared, his voice raw with desperation.

Another officer, Caleb Winston, approached, his eyes filled with a familiar remorse. A long shared history with Jordan was evident in the way Caleb waved off the officers restraining Jordan. "Let him through! I'll take care of him."

Jordan stumbled forward as their hold loosened, glaring at them before moving closer to Caleb, who stopped him gently. "Caleb... is it..." Jordan's voice trembled.

Caleb nodded, the pain of delivering such news to a childhood friend etched on his face.

"And the baby?" Jordan choked out, tears brimming in his eyes.

Caleb took a deep, shuddering breath. "I'm so sorry, Jordan..."

Jordan collapsed to the ground, his eyes fixed on Courtney's lifeless body as it was wheeled into the back of an ambulance. His breathing grew rapid, culminating in a guttural, primal scream that tore through the night sky.

Back in the club's parking lot, moments later, Officer Caleb Winston walked towards Jordan, a familiar face in the chaos. Perhaps he was the anchor Jordan needed. Caleb tried for a nonchalant tone. "Hunting again, Jordan?" he joked.

Jordan looked up, shaking his friend's hand. "No... just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Caleb nodded. "Good, 'cause I don't think Angela would be happy if you were..." Both men managed a faint smile, a shared, dark chuckle. "So, you gonna tell me what happened or am I waiting for three dead bodies?"

Jordan shook his head, his composure fraying. "No... no... you know I don't kill unless there was clearly no other choice..."

"Yeah, I do. I also know what you've been through and that you know that I can't help you unless you tell me what happened." Caleb's voice was firm but understanding.

Jordan took a deep breath, trying to regain control. "Have you seen the girl?"

Caleb's brow furrowed in confusion. "What girl, Jordan, talk to me. I heard from dispatch that you covered a girl up with a curtain, her?"

"Yes, yes her..." Jordan said, his voice laced with frustration.

"Alright, breathe..." Caleb instructed. "Start from the beginning."

Jordan's tension eased slightly. "Do you know if she's okay?"

Caleb's patience wore thin. "My colleagues are with her right now... I can imagine she's okay, but rattled if she saw you in action."

Jordan took another deep breath, his eyes flicking towards the club entrance. "Alright... alright... I was only here to find out some surprise my friend Brent Harmon kept saying he had..."

"What sort of surprise?" Caleb pressed.

Jordan's gaze landed on the entrance, where a female officer, Bailey Eastman, was escorting Mila outside. Mila, dressed in street clothes, was wrapped in a blanket. Caleb followed Jordan's gaze, seeing the striking resemblance Mila bore to Jordan's lost love.

"She looks just like her..." Jordan whispered, tears welling in his eyes.

Caleb sighed. "I can see it. That's... that's intense." He looked back at Jordan, a dawning realization in his eyes. "I

think I see." He shook his head. "You know, Jordan... there's a facility in the area looking into PTSD treatments using psychedelic mushrooms. Seems like there's some promising results behind it. Dr. Martin might be able to get you a referral..."

Jordan sighed, a weary exhalation.

"Alright. Stay here, I need to go talk to the other officers. I can trust you not to go anywhere, right?"

Jordan nodded, remaining by his truck as Caleb walked towards the club. In the moments of silence, Jordan and Mila, as if drawn by an invisible thread, unconsciously stared at each other, the distance between them unable to mask the lingering, unspoken feelings.

4

Echoes

The harsh fluorescent lights of Dr. Martin's office lobby hummed with a low, monotonous drone, casting a sickly, pallid glow over Jordan. He was once again slumped in the familiar, uncomfortable chair, its worn fabric doing little to cushion his weary frame. A suffocating wave of guilt, sharp and insistent, pressed down on him, a direct consequence of his recent, explosive outburst at the strip club. His entire body felt as though it were melting under its oppressive weight, each muscle protesting the lingering tension. Each deliberate tick of the clock on the wall seemed to amplify the churning anxiety in his stomach, a relentless reminder of the chaotic, alcohol-fueled night before. The air felt thick with unspoken regrets and a pervasive sense of dread.

Dr. Martin emerged from her office, her silhouette framed by the softer, more inviting light within. Her gaze swept over his crumpled form with a practiced blend of concern and professionalism, a clinician's detachment subtly interwoven with genuine empathy. She drew a slow, deliberate breath, the sub-

tle rise and fall of her chest the only sound in the quiet lobby, a moment of pre-conversation composure. Without a word, she silently gestured for him to follow her inside, her hand briefly indicating the open doorway. No words were exchanged, yet a silent, mutual understanding passed between them—an unspoken acknowledgment of the difficult conversation that lay ahead, a familiar dance of patient and therapist. Jordan, however, remained entirely oblivious to the surprise waiting for him within the sanctuary of her office, a secret that would soon unravel his preconceived notions of the session.

Inside, Dr. Martin's office appeared largely unchanged, a comforting bastion of routine amidst Jordan's internal chaos. The familiar muted tones of the walls, the orderly arrangement of books on the shelves, and the gleaming awards displayed with quiet pride offered a deceptive sense of normalcy, a veneer over the unusual circumstances. Yet, a new presence immediately caught Jordan off guard, a subtle shift in the room's familiar energy. A man, dressed not in a police uniform, but in plain civilian clothes—a dark, well-fitting jacket over a simple collared shirt—sat waiting. His posture was relaxed, one leg casually crossed over the other, but his eyes were attentive, observing Jordan with an almost imperceptible intensity.

"How are you holding up, bud?" The man's voice was warm, instantly recognizable, cutting through Jordan's anxiety with a surprising familiarity. It was Caleb Winston, his friend, a detective he'd come to trust implicitly over their years

of shared history and mutual respect. A genuine smile, a rarity in recent days, touched Jordan's lips at the sight of him, a brief reprieve from the internal turmoil that had consumed him. He extended his hand for a shake, a firm grip connecting them. "Been better, dude. What are you doing here?" Jordan's brow furrowed slightly, a mixture of surprise and genuine curiosity flickering across his face.

Dr. Martin moved smoothly behind her large wooden desk, her movements precise and unhurried. She pulled out her chair with a soft scrape against the polished floor, the sound a gentle punctuation mark in the quiet room. Two other chairs were already positioned in front of her, carefully arranged and angled, ready for Jordan and Caleb. She clasped her hands on the desk, her gaze steady and unwavering as she addressed Jordan directly. "Because of the nature of today's discussion, I asked Caleb if he would join us for your session... if that is alright?" She gestured for the men to take a seat, her tone gentle, almost apologetic, as if anticipating his discomfort. "I don't want you to feel like we're trying to outnumber you in any way..."

A flicker of nervousness crossed Jordan's face, a momentary tightening around his eyes as he processed her words. He glanced from Dr. Martin to Caleb, then back again, weighing the implications of Caleb's unexpected presence. The knot in his stomach, which had momentarily loosened, began to tighten once more. "No, it's okay," he said, his voice a little strained but sincere. "I trust your judgment, and... well, I

can't really recall a time Caleb and I have ever been at odds... so..." He trailed off, the unspoken implications hanging in the air—the unusualness of the situation, the implicit need for a third party, and the certainty that whatever was coming would be significant. Yet, the presence of his friend, while unexpected, was oddly comforting, a familiar anchor in the turbulent waters of his life.

Caleb, ever perceptive, sensing Jordan's subtle shift in demeanor, reached out and gently patted Jordan on the shoulder, a simple, non-verbal gesture of reassurance, a silent message of solidarity.

Jordan turned to Caleb, a new thought forming in his mind, pushing aside the immediate anxieties about the session itself. The memory of the previous night, particularly a specific, terrifying image, resurfaced with vivid clarity. "Actually, if you don't mind, and if it's not going to cause trouble, I was wanting to ask you about the girl?" He thought of the terrified dancer, her wide eyes, the fear he'd inadvertently caused, a lingering regret in the chaos of his memory.

Angela nodded subtly towards Caleb, a silent cue for him to speak, a subtle indication of the information they had already discussed.

"She's okay, Jordan," Caleb began, his voice calm and steady, a reassuring balm. "To be honest, even though you scared her, she was more worried about you."

Jordan flinched at the remark, a sharp pang of shame piercing through him, a realization of the unintended consequences of his actions. He looked down at his hands, clenching and unclenching his fists, the muscle memory of the fight still raw. "Is that so?" His voice was barely above a whisper, laced with disbelief and a renewed sense of self-reproach.

"And so we can start off on a good foot, Caleb, why don't you share what you told me earlier?" Angela prompted, her tone suggesting a desire to move past the immediate discomfort and into the heart of the matter, to get to the core reason for Caleb's presence.

Jordan anxiously shifted his gaze between Angela and Caleb, a knot tightening in his stomach, a premonition of difficulty. He braced himself, knowing instinctively whatever was coming next wouldn't be easy, that the discussion was about to take a serious turn. The quiet hum of the office air conditioner seemed to amplify the tension, and the faint scent of Angela's lavender perfume did little to calm his frayed nerves. He clasped his hands together, his knuckles white, a silent testament to the churning anxiety within him.

"It's about the bikers you assaulted at the club, J." Caleb's words were direct, leaving no room for misunderstanding, cutting straight to the heart of the matter. His voice, usually

gruff, held a note of weary resignation, like a parent addressing a perpetually mischievous child.

"Oh..." Jordan's voice was barely a whisper, the single syllable escaping his lips like a deflated sigh. The memory of the frenzied brawl flashed through his mind—the deafening roar of the music, the acrid smell of spilled beer, the surge of adrenaline, the consuming anger, the sickening crack of bone against bone, a visceral replay of the violence. Each detail was a painful re-enactment, a jarring sequence of flashes and impacts. He could almost feel the phantom ache in his fists, the lingering taste of metallic blood.

"You did some damage... a few cracked bones, a stab wound, busted teeth and a dislocated jaw..." Caleb paused, letting his words sink in, the severity of Jordan's actions laid bare, an undeniable tally of destruction. The list of injuries painted a grim picture, each one a stark reminder of the ferocity of the fight. The words hung in the air, heavy with unspoken judgment. "But, because of who it was you took down... you're in the clear." The last words hung in the air, a sudden, unexpected twist, a jarring shift from condemnation to absolution. Jordan looked up, confusion warring with a flicker of relief. The implication was clear: his actions, however violent and reprehensible, had somehow been justified by the identities of his victims. The mystery of the bikers, and their unexpected connection to his surprising reprieve, now took center stage, demanding an explanation.

"What do you mean?" Jordan asked, his voice laced with shock. His brow furrowed, a mix of disbelief and dawning comprehension on his face.

"The guys you took out were on my department's most wanted list for a string of assaults and robberies. We've been looking for them for a few months now, and after what you did, they were begging to be locked up so they wouldn't see you again..." Caleb watched Jordan process the information, a faint, almost imperceptible smirk playing on his lips. "You got lucky, Jordan. You may have helped some people out, but favors are running short. I can't guarantee another outburst like that won't land you in deep shit." The implicit warning in Caleb's tone was clear, a thin line between gratitude and exasperation.

"Which is why I asked Caleb to be here today..." Angela added, her voice calm and measured, a stark contrast to the escalating tension. Her gaze was steady, unwavering, a professional curiosity mingled with concern.

Jordan squeezed his eyes shut, bracing himself for the inevitable direction the conversation was headed. He knew this wasn't just about the bikers; it was about the underlying issues that had led him to that violent confrontation.

"Jordan, it is my understanding that you had trouble talking about the situation with Caleb when you two last spoke. Now that you've had some time to process things, we would

like for you to tell us your recollection about what happened that night…" Angela, or Dr. Martin, as Jordan now remembered her, spoke with a gentle yet firm tone, her professional demeanor taking over.

Jordan frowned. "Alright… where should I start?" He ran a hand through his hair, the gesture betraying a residual unease.

Dr. Martin opened a notebook and clicked her pen, the small sound echoing in the otherwise quiet room. "Start from the journal entry you left last night. Based on what I read, you were waiting in the parking lot for Brent?"

Jordan took a moment to settle in his chair, shifting his weight. "Yeah. I figured it would be a good time to sort out my thoughts while I was waiting…" He stared at a spot on the wall, as if replaying the scene in his mind.

"So, start from there. I can only gather so much from what has been shown to me. You mentioned in your voicemail about a Chris and Tyler?" Dr. Martin prompted, her pen poised.

"Yeah…" Jordan glanced towards Caleb, a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes. "I don't remember ever getting their last names." He focused back on Dr. Martin. "But when Brent finally showed up they were in his new sports car with him. Allegedly we all went to school together but I don't recall ever

seeing them before that night." The memory was hazy, tinged with a sense of unease that had only deepened since then.

Dr. Martin jotted down notes. "And how did that make you feel?"

"Given the circumstances, I tried to brush it off, but it didn't sit right. I wanted to just leave, because of my own anxieties about going out. We all introduced ourselves to each other, cracked a few jokes, until one of them suggested we head inside to look at the women..." He paused, the memory sour in his mouth.

"Now given what you told me about Brent's addiction, do you feel that you may have attributed them to being active influences in Brent's behavior?" Dr. Martin probed, her gaze insightful.

"Perhaps?" Jordan shrugged, a gesture of uncertainty. "I'm not joined to the guy by the hip, but something about them seemed off. Tyler, he seemed like he was genuinely an idiot; if I'm being completely honest..." He trailed off, a slight grimace on his face.

Dr. Martin made a few more notes, her hand moving swiftly across the page. "Please, continue."

Jordan nodded. "Anyway, we managed to get a booth. Things seemed fine but I found myself scanning everyone in-

side. It just didn't feel right being there, I was looking for an excuse to justify the way I felt. Then I noticed an older guy at the bar harassing a waitress. He started getting 'handsy,' I felt my blood pressure rising enough that the glass in my hand started to crack..." He demonstrated with his hand, clenching it involuntarily.

"Were you drinking when this happened?" Angela asked, her tone sharper now, focused on a critical detail.

"No, you know me, I don't drink unless it's a special occasion and I ain't driving... this was anything but that..." Jordan replied, shaking his head.

"Go on..." Angela prompted, her expression unreadable.

"Thankfully the bouncer intervened before I did, kicked the guy out. That's when I noticed Brent trying to get my attention..." Jordan's voice grew quieter, a shift in his demeanor.

Caleb leaned forward, his gaze fixed on Jordan, absorbing every word as if sifting through a complex puzzle, searching for a missing piece of information. Beside him, Dr. Martin continued her meticulous note-taking, the soft whisper of her pen on paper a rhythmic counterpoint to Jordan's unfolding narrative.

"That's when he told me about wanting to give me 'one more night with Courtney.'" Jordan's voice softened, a profound wistfulness entering his tone, as if the words themselves were fragile memories he cradled gently. "I was hesitant, of course, but the pressure... it was overwhelming. I eventually caved." A pause, a visible swallow. "That's when two girls, their faces shadowed, blindfolded me. They led me into the back room, and then I saw her..." The memory, even now, was startlingly vivid, almost tangible in the air between them, imbued with the raw emotion of its original experience.

"The stripper?" Caleb interjected, his voice cutting through the narrative, a hint of surprise, perhaps even a flicker of judgment, in his tone.

Jordan gave Caleb a subtle, almost imperceptible glare, a clear indication of his discomfort with the term, the cheapening of a moment he held sacred. "Yeah, her. Just seeing her... it was like Courtney was back, right there in front of me... it was just too real, too raw, and I had to leave. She really was sweet, though, in that moment. She knew just a little too quick something was wrong, and she tried to help... Which was why, when I left, got cornered by those guys, and then heard her scream... I couldn't hold it in anymore..." His voice trailed off, the implicit violence of the memory hanging heavy in the air.

Without a word, Dr. Martin turned her computer monitor, revealing security footage from the club. The screen dis-

played Jordan in action—a whirlwind of controlled power. There were no screams from him, no yelling, just the raw, unadulterated revelation of Jordan's formidable strength from an outside perspective. The stark reality of the footage seemed to strip away any subjective interpretation.

Jordan sank deeper into his seat, watching himself with a strange, almost detached fascination, seeing how others viewed him with his monster, the true extent of his capabilities, on full, horrifying display. It was a confrontation with an aspect of himself he rarely, if ever, witnessed.

"This is the first time you really see yourself, isn't it?" Dr. Martin asked gently, her voice soft, understanding.

Jordan nodded, his eyes still fixed on the screen, watching the devastating damage he inflicted on the bikers at the very moment all three were subdued, their bodies crumpling under his assault. "It is," he murmured, the word laden with a mix of awe and quiet horror.

The video continued, showing Jordan, in a surge of primal force, ripping the curtain from the wall. Dr. Martin paused it, freezing on the precise moment Mila and Jordan first made eye contact—a frame so emotionally charged it felt less like a static image and more like a painting, imbued with a profound, unspoken narrative.

"I had asked Caleb to bring footage from the incident in today so I could better understand what took place," Dr. Martin explained, her gaze shifting between Jordan and the frozen image. "Also, to give you an opportunity to see, through the eyes of everyone else, the profound impact your actions have." Dr. Martin zoomed in on the image, the faces of Jordan and Mila filling the screen, their expressions a study in contrasting emotions. "Your actions may be somewhat justified in your mind, Jordan. But an outburst like this, regardless of the provocation, puts yourself and others in harm's way. Though I cannot lie when I say that seeing this very frame showed me something I had yet to really see in you... Can you tell me why that is?"

Jordan's eyes began to well up, a familiar ache surfacing within him. He shifted his weight uncomfortably, then reached into his pocket, his fingers closing around his wallet. He opened it with a practiced, almost reverent care, then carefully extracted a worn, beloved photo of him and Courtney. In the image, they were locked in a loving embrace, their faces radiant with a pure, unadulterated love and happiness that now seemed like a distant dream.

Jordan handed the photo to Caleb, who was immediately captivated by the image, a soft smile gracing his lips. "It is nice to finally get to see what she looked like full of life, Jordan. She's gorgeous, truly..." Caleb held the photo up, aligning Courtney's face with Mila's image on the monitor. The

resemblance between the two women was staggering, an almost uncanny mirror image. "You're a lucky guy, Jordan."

Dr. Martin watched the exchange with a keen intrigue, observing the unspoken communication as Caleb and Jordan exchanged a look—Caleb mentally asking if he could pass the photo along. Jordan, with a subtle nod, granted permission, allowing Caleb to carefully hand the photo to Dr. Martin.

Dr. Martin took the photo, her brow furrowed in concentration. She then turned her computer monitor, bringing it closer to her, to compare the resemblance for herself. A faint gasp escaped her lips as the undeniable similarity became apparent.

"I figured it would be easier to show why..." Jordan explained, his voice thick with emotion, the explanation a quiet admission of a profound connection.

"I see that," Dr. Martin replied, a hint of genuine surprise in her voice, mixed with a newfound understanding. She handed the photo back to Jordan, her gaze lingering on him for a moment. "I know Caleb brought up some trials involving psychedelic mushrooms... have you given it some thought?"

Jordan nodded, a slight, almost imperceptible tilt of his head.

"I have," Jordan said, his voice laced with a dry, almost cynical sarcasm. "Truthfully, I prefer mushrooms on pizza." A small, almost imperceptible smirk played on his lips.

Caleb snickered, a small laugh escaping him, while Dr. Martin rolled her eyes, a faint, indulgent smirk playing on her lips. It was a familiar dynamic, one that spoke of a shared history and an unusual rapport.

"Jordan," Dr. Martin said, her voice a gentle, almost affectionate chide, a warning that the session was not a place for jokes.

"I know. I know." Jordan sighed, the humor dissipating as quickly as it had appeared. "Can you send me more information so I can think about it?" He paused, gathering his thoughts, his gaze becoming more serious. "I know that you two are trying to help, and quite frankly, you're among the few people I trust. But given the circumstances of my life at the moment, I don't want to entirely lose my intimidation..."

"And why is that?" Dr. Martin inquired, her curiosity piqued by his unexpected admission.

"I know it's not my place to worry, but it's Paisley's boyfriend. From what I gather, he's scared of me..."

"Jordan, just how big you are has scared people since middle school," Caleb interjected, a teasing lilt to his voice, a famil-

iar refrain. "Usually they weren't good people to begin with, if you recall."

Dr. Martin flinched at Caleb's casual remark, a subtle indication of her surprise at the depth of their shared past and the bluntness of Caleb's assessment.

"How long have you two exactly known each other?" she asked, her curiosity now fully piqued, a new layer of understanding dawning on her.

"Like he said, since middle school," Jordan replied, a slight shrug of his massive shoulders.

Dr. Martin made a quick note in her journal, acknowledging their long-standing, deeply entrenched relationship, a bond that clearly influenced their interactions.

"That explains why you two are so nonchalant with each other," she mused, a faint smile playing on her lips as she understood the unique dynamic between the seasoned therapist, Dr. Angela Martin, and her long-term patient, Jordan. Their relationship had evolved beyond the typical doctor-patient boundaries, a testament to the years of shared vulnerability and trust.

"Paisley's boyfriend, what's his name?" Caleb asked Jordan, his tone shifting abruptly, becoming more serious. The

change in his demeanor was palpable, a clear indication that this was a matter of some importance.

"Daren Saint, I believe. Mid-30s. With everything that's happened, I want him afraid until he earns trust," Jordan's voice was firm, resolute, betraying a deep-seated protectiveness that surfaced whenever Paisley's name was mentioned. His gaze was steady, unwavering, reflecting the conviction behind his words.

Caleb rolled his eyes in annoyance, a clear sign of his disagreement with Jordan's rather unconventional, almost primal, approach to dealing with the situation. He crossed his arms, a subtle gesture of disapproval.

"I take it you met?" Jordan asked, noting Caleb's obvious reaction, a flicker of understanding in his eyes. He knew Caleb's moral compass was often more calibrated than his own, and a direct encounter would explain the immediate judgment.

Caleb shook his head, a silent confirmation. Jordan held up his hands in surrender, indicating he wouldn't press for more details, respecting Caleb's unspoken reluctance. The unspoken understanding between them was a bond forged through shared experiences, a language all their own.

"I see. Well... Jordan... I will send you the information and you let me know if it sounds like something you'll consider."

Dr. Martin interjected smoothly, sensing the subtle tension and steering the conversation back to the purpose of their meeting. Her voice was calm and reassuring, a steady anchor in the shifting currents of their conversation.

Caleb glanced at the clock on Dr. Martin's wall. "I should get going, it was good to see you both again." He stood, a subtle shift in his posture indicating his readiness to depart. The meeting had run longer than anticipated, and other commitments beckoned.

Later, in Dr. Martin's office lobby, Caleb was just about to leave when Jordan rushed out, his steps hurried, as if propelled by an urgent need to catch him before he disappeared.

"Hey, Caleb..." Jordan called out, his voice slightly breathless.

Caleb stopped and turned as Jordan held out his hand for what seemed like a typical handshake. Instead, with a powerful, unexpected motion, Caleb used Jordan's hand to pull him into a tight, heartfelt hug. It was a gesture that spoke volumes, transcending words.

"I just want to thank you, for everything, brother," Jordan said, his voice thick with emotion, muffled against Caleb's shoulder. The gratitude was profound, resonating from the depths of his being.

They smacked each other's backs in the embrace, a familiar, almost ritualistic gesture of camaraderie and unspoken promises.

"You'd do the same for me..." Caleb said, releasing Jordan from the hug, a knowing look in his eyes. He nodded goodbye to both Jordan and Dr. Martin, a silent acknowledgment of their enduring connection. Jordan, his eyes welling up, jumped slightly when he saw Dr. Martin behind him, a tissue box held out in understanding.

"How do you feel?" Dr. Martin asked softly, her gaze gentle and probing.

Jordan grabbed a couple of tissues, dabbing at his eyes and clearing his face. "Pretty good, actually," he said, a genuine smile spreading across his face, a glimmer of light after the emotional release.

Dr. Martin set the tissues aside, returning his smile. "For what it's worth, in spite of how the incident made you feel, you are doing so well." Her words were a balm, a professional reassurance that affirmed his progress.

Jordan looked at her, his expression thoughtful, a lingering question in his eyes. "What about letting the monster out?" he murmured, referring to the powerful, almost uncontrollable surge of anger he'd experienced recently.

"Did it?" Dr. Martin countered, her voice calm and steady. "Because, as scary as it looked, no monster would've covered the frightened woman like you did, shielding her from harm, protecting her instinctively..." Her words challenged his self-perception, offering a different narrative.

"Maybe you're right..." Jordan conceded, a flicker of understanding in his eyes.

Angela gently brushed Jordan's arm in a comforting gesture, her touch light and reassuring. "May I ask you something?"

"Sure, what is it?" Jordan replied, his attention fully on her.

Dr. Martin looked intently at Jordan, her gaze unwavering. "What are you going to do if you see her again? The girl." Her question hung in the air, weighted with significance.

Jordan sighed, a long, weary exhalation. "Honestly, I don't know." His uncertainty was palpable, a reflection of the internal conflict raging within him.

Dr. Martin smirked, a hint of playful challenge in her expression. "If I may offer a suggestion... I think if you feel something towards her... you should ask her out?"

Jordan raised an eyebrow, surprised by her directness. It was a bold suggestion, given his recent emotional turmoil.

"I know, you mentioned it feels like you're cheating on Courtney. But, truly think about this Jordan..." Dr. Martin paused, letting her words sink in. "Would she want you to be alone? Would she want you to forgo happiness and connection because of her absence?"

Jordan sighed again, the weight of the question settling upon him. "No, no she wouldn't." The realization was a quiet, profound truth.

"After seeing Courtney's photo, I understand now where you were in shock at her appearance," Dr. Martin continued, her voice gentle but firm. "The resemblance between them is eerie. Even I have to admit that. But there appears to be something there. And, don't try to think that you're trying to replace Courtney... no one can replace what you clearly had with her. Try to think of the resemblance as being nothing more than you having a type, a subconscious preference. You might be surprised at what you might find, a new connection, a different kind of happiness."

Jordan offered Dr. Martin a faint smile, a silent acknowledgment of her unwavering trust in his judgment, her profound understanding of his pain. If only the trust between a therapist and her patient was enough to shield Jordan from the horrors lurking just beneath the surface, awakened by his outburst at the club, a monstrous presence that would manifest later that night and just across town.

The air in the rundown office building hung heavy with stale cigar smoke and the faint, almost forgotten scent of old paper, a testament to years of neglect and illicit dealings. Hector Delgado, a man whose dark clothes and worn leather jacket hinted at a life lived in shadows and clandestine operations, sat hunched over a stack of documents, his brow furrowed in concentration. His cigar, a thin ribbon of acrid smoke curling lazily from its tip, was an extension of the criminal empire he commanded—a sprawling network that included the very strip club that provided his front, a seemingly legitimate facade for his darker ventures.

The door burst open with a sudden, jarring force, and a younger man, Flaya Eastman, swaggered in, his confidence bordering on arrogance. His baggy clothes and the tablet clutched in one hand were a stark contrast to Hector's almost anachronistic attire, a clash of generations and criminal methodologies. Flaya, a new breed of criminal, relied on technology and brute force in equal measure.

"Hey, boss!" Flaya shouted, his voice echoing in the small office.

Hector's head snapped up, annoyance etched onto his face.

"I've got the replay from the fight the other night," Flaya continued, oblivious to Hector's irritation. "Looks like Daren

Cross and his boys tried messing with a bitch, and some big mofo messed them up... But that big guy... sumthin' ain't right about him?"

Flaya thrust the tablet at Hector, the screen displaying security footage of Jordan's violent outburst at Forgotten Desires, cued and ready to play with a single touch.

Hector sighed, a weary exhalation that spoke of countless frustrations. "Flaya, I told you to be more respectful to my ladies..."

"Whateva'," Flaya interjected, waving a dismissive hand. "Just touch the tablet and see what I mean."

Another sigh escaped Hector's lips as he tapped the screen. Moments later, the cigar in his mouth, forgotten in his awe, tumbled to his desk.

"*El Grand Cabrón...*" Hector whispered, the words barely audible.

Flaya, confused, scrunched his brow. "Who the fuck is the Big Goat?"

Hector stared at the footage for a beat longer before letting the tablet clatter onto his desk. "It's not the 'big goat,' you stupid idiot!" he growled, his voice rising. "He's called the Big Bastard!"

Flaya recoiled, hands raised in a gesture of surrender. "Hey! Woah! I was just asking a question!"

Hector's anger, mixed with a nascent panic, flared. "That girl! You need to get that girl out of here! She is no longer to have any affiliation with this club!"

"Boss, why the fuck would you..." Flaya began, but Hector cut him off, jumping from his seat.

"Do not harm her! Do not let her come to any harm! Do not give her any reason to suspect anything!" Hector roared, his voice laced with a frantic urgency. "I don't care if she brings in the 'most dough,' she will get us all killed if we don't cut her loose, now!"

"The fuck is going on? Why not just kill her?" Flaya demanded, his confusion deepening.

"Are you listening to me, you stupid fuck?!" Hector's voice was a low growl. "We cannot let that man have any reason to know what's going on."

Flaya, still confused, held his hands up in a placating gesture. "What's the deal with this fool? What did he do?"

Hector's head dropped, a heavy sigh escaping him. He reached under his desk, pulling out a mini-fridge and retriev-

ing a bottle of tequila and two glasses. Taking a deep breath, he said, "I suppose you haven't been working for me long enough to know the story."

Hector poured the tequila, the amber liquid glinting in the dim light. "Drink?" he offered, holding up a glass.

Flaya accepted it, downing the contents in a single gulp. Hector merely sipped, settling back into his chair.

"I apologize," Hector began. "First, *El Grand Cabrón* does literally mean 'the big goat,' but don't rely too much on cheap tutors online..." He took another sip. "*El Grand Cabrón* was a bounty hunter, brutal... effective... focused."

"In the beginning, he was just a pain in the ass that was too good at his job. Managed to arrest my brother. Granted, my brother was not the wisest and frequently smacked around his wife... so, something was bound to happen."

"But then... something happened. *El Grand Cabrón's* woman and unborn child were murdered... by my fucking nephew."

"What happened?" Flaya asked, his tone now hushed.

Hector took another long drink from his tequila. "I could never get Carlos to talk. Probably out of ego to admit the scar on his face was caused by a woman. But I suspected two

things…" Hector held up two fingers. "Either, one, Carlos acted in revenge for his father dying in a prison fight." He dropped his pointer finger. "Or two, the stupid bastard just got lucky. Whatever happened… it pissed off the wrong bastard."

"*El Grand Cabrón* suddenly stopped caring about the money. Word was, he was looking for who took his love. Even if it meant leaving anyone who stood in his way so physically broken, they became trapped in their bodies."

"So why not just kill him?" Flaya ventured, a hint of desperation in his voice.

Hector stared at Flaya in disbelief. "You don't think we tried? We had him shot, he shoots the shooter right in the eye! We had people try jumping him, *El Grand Cabrón* just threw their bodies like dolls after he paralyzed them. Someone tried attacking him while he was out grocery shopping, made a huge mess. He was beaten so brutally, he will live the rest of his life like a four-year-old. A racer tried slamming his car into *El Grand Cabrón*… he was the only one to leave a mark…"

"But even then… *El Grand Cabrón* managed to cut him deep enough his guts risked falling out…"

Flaya winced, instinctively clutching his arm across his torso. "Jesus fuck! How did you get him to stop?"

"A fucking miracle," Hector muttered. "Some cops on the inside told us that one of them was a childhood friend of Cabrón... So an idea was put forward. We use the friend to get *El Grand Cabrón* to 'retire on his own terms,' maybe seek therapy."

"Therapy? The fuck you on about?" Flaya scoffed.

Hector shook his head, a mixture of exasperation and weariness on his face. "This is what you young punks don't understand. Those stupid fucking video games got you thinking that all your fucking problems can be solved by shooting them!"

Flaya tensed, his hand instinctively going to his waistband. "Well... you right..."

With a swift, practiced motion, Flaya produced a handgun and fired three shots into Hector's chest, killing him instantly.

"Who the punk now?" Flaya muttered, staring down at Hector's lifeless body. He pulled out his smartphone and dialed. The voice on the other end, unseen, crackled through the phone.

"The fuck you want!" Carlos Delgado's voice snapped.

"It's done," Flaya said simply.

"What did he say?" Carlos demanded.

"To fire the girl from the club so some goatman don't start killing everybody," Flaya replied.

"The slut still has some use... I'll decide when she's done," Carlos said. "Now, is that bitch sister of yours still a cop?"

"Yes sir... want her to arrest this goatman?" Flaya asked, a hint of eagerness in his voice.

"No... I want her and the other pigs to watch him and the bitch for a few days. I'm almost ready..."

Carlos hung up. Flaya shook his head, a faint sneer on his lips, and left Hector's office.

"I better be fucking paid for this shit..."

5

Rising Sunshine

Days later, the mundane routine of grocery shopping offered Jordan a stark contrast to the chaotic night that still haunted his thoughts. He found himself in the familiar, bustling parking lot of a grocery store, mindlessly loading bags into the back of his truck. Despite the normalcy of the scene, his gaze habitually swept his surroundings, a restless anxiety about some unseen threat never quite leaving him. It was a constant hum beneath the surface of his everyday life, a reminder of the raw power he had unleashed and the monster he feared he had become.

His cart nearly empty, his attention snagged on a woman passing the last row of cars, heading for the store entrance. His breath hitched. A familiar figure. The dancer from the club. His gaze caught hers, a flicker of recognition passing between them, a silent acknowledgment of the shared, intense moment from nights prior.

He tried to look away, to hide his intense scrutiny, to melt into the anonymity of the crowd, but Mila was already uneasy, her brow furrowed as she tried to reconcile the man before her with the shadowy figure who had saved her. Was it really him, here in the mundane light of day? Was it safe to approach the man who had wielded such raw, untamed power?

Jordan, having secured the last of his bags, walked the cart to the nearest return stall. Coincidentally, or perhaps by some strange twist of fate, it happened to be closest to Mila. Finally certain of his identity, a blend of trepidation and curiosity tugging at her, Mila approached him, a nervous tremor still in her steps.

"Umm, hello..." she began, her voice a little shaky, a whisper against the hum of the parking lot. "Did we meet the other night?"

Jordan, feeling a blush creep up his neck at the still-prevalent memory of his resemblance to the monster, locked eyes with her. He gave a curt nod, a silent affirmation. "Yeah, I believe we did..." The words felt inadequate, a poor descriptor for the maelstrom of violence and fear that had brought them together.

Mila shifted her weight, visibly nervous and intimidated by his intense gaze. The quiet strength radiating from him was palpable, a stark contrast to the frantic energy of the club. Jordan, drawing on every ounce of his strength to remain pre-

sent, to not let his own internal turmoil overwhelm him, took a deep breath. "I... I'm sorry if I hurt you that night." The apology felt hollow, insufficient, given the circumstances.

Mila let out a nervous laugh, a brittle sound that broke the tension. "You have nothing to apologize for. Those pigs deserved it... but are you okay?" Her concern was genuine, a small, unexpected balm on his raw nerves.

"As much as I can be..." Jordan replied, his voice flat, devoid of emotion, a carefully constructed mask. The weight of his recent actions pressed down on him, a heavy shroud he couldn't shake.

Mila sensed his reluctance to speak, feeling put off by his rigid stance, the way he seemed to hold himself apart. Her voice cracked, allowing a faint, native accent to seep through her carefully chosen English, adding a layer of vulnerability. "I could tell. But, I hoped to see you again... to thank you for helping me." There was a quiet desperation in her tone, a genuine need to express her gratitude.

Jordan simply nodded, starting to pick up on her underlying anxiety, the subtle signs of a deeper unease beneath her composed exterior. "You're welcome..." The words felt stiff, formal, inadequate to the moment.

Mila began to back away, a quiet retreat, and Jordan, not wanting their encounter to end on such a distant, unresolved

note, took another deep breath, pushing past his own discomfort. "To be honest... I've been worried about you since that night." The confession felt raw, exposed, but true.

Mila's face softened, a small, genuine smile gracing her lips, transforming her features. "I am happy to hear you say that. I was worried for you as well." Her words were a surprising comfort, a lifeline in the turbulent waters of his mind.

"For what it's worth, thank you for that," Jordan said, a genuine warmth entering his tone, a subtle shift in the air between them. Her unexpected concern had touched something deep within him.

Mila looked confused, a slight tilt of her head. "For what?"

"For caring," he elaborated, his gaze softening as he looked at her. "Though, would I be correct in guessing that you have quite the story?" He sensed a depth to her, a hidden narrative waiting to be revealed.

Mila's confusion was visible, yet there was an undeniable intrigue in her eyes, a spark of curiosity. "I just... I knew you didn't belong in that place. I know you are different." Her words were a powerful affirmation, a testament to her perception, and a sudden relief washed over Jordan.

Jordan felt a knot of tension begin to loosen in his chest, a tight coil unwinding. Her simple statement, devoid of judg-

ment, was like a balm. “Can I ask you what your name is?” He wanted to know more, to understand the woman who saw beyond the monster.

Mila’s eyes widened in surprise, a delicate blush creeping up her neck. “Why do you want to know?”

“There’s just something about you that I’d like to get to know more about,” Jordan confessed, his gaze softening, losing its previous intensity. “An elegance in the way you carry yourself. And, if you’re okay with it, I’d like to take you out to dinner to get to know you better.” The words tumbled out, earnest and sincere.

Mila couldn’t help but smile, a genuine, joyful expression that lit up her face. “I’d love to. There is the new Latin restaurant that just opened I want to try. Shall we meet there, tonight?” Her eagerness was infectious.

JJordan grinned, trying to maintain a cool exterior despite the sudden rush of excitement bubbling within him. “Yeah, sounds good. I’ve been wanting to try it too.” His heart hammered against his ribs, a rhythm of pure anticipation. He couldn't believe this was happening.

Mila pulled out her smartphone, unlocked it, and opened her contact list before handing it to Jordan, her movements fluid and graceful, a dancer’s poise even in this mundane act. “I am Mila Sabirova.” Her voice was a soft melody, with that

subtle, intriguing lilt that had captivated him from their first encounter.

Jordan caught her hint, mirroring her actions on his own phone before returning it, a nervous tremor in his fingers. “My name is Jordan Lambert. It’s a pleasure to finally know the name of such a beautiful woman as yourself.” He hoped his voice didn't betray the frantic excitement thrumming beneath his composure.

Mila blushed, a delicate rose blooming on her cheeks, as they entered their phone numbers into each other’s devices. “It is nice to meet you properly, Jordan. I will be seeing you.” Her eyes, a vibrant shade he couldn't quite place, met his, sparkling with a hint of amusement.

With a playful wink, Mila turned and walked into the grocery store, her steps light and purposeful. Jordan stood there, a wide smile spreading across his face, trying to contain the surge of excitement that threatened to make him float away. “I can’t believe I just did that!” he mouthed to himself, his voice barely a whisper. He felt like he was walking on air.

Inside the store, a brief glimpse of Mila revealed her smiling as she watched Jordan excitedly hurry back to his truck, a faint giggle escaping her as she noticed him almost dancing with every step. Her smile widened, a genuine, joyful expression that hinted at a playful spirit.

Back in the parking lot, Jordan climbed into his truck, still buzzing from the unexpected encounter that had transformed into a date. He checked his phone, ensuring Mila's information was saved, a tiny victory in itself, then opened the journaling app Dr. Martin had given him. He knew he had to record this.

"Well... you asked what I would do if I saw her again, the girl from the club," he began to type, his fingers flying across the screen, unable to keep up with the torrent of thoughts and emotions.

"I finally have an answer for you, Dr. Martin. I saw her again, I was just running errands, and she happened to find me at the store. The conversation was a bit awkward at first, a clumsy dance of polite introductions, and now that I've talked to her, I realize I need to be careful with my words. She has a faint accent, kind of sounds Russian or Ukrainian, I'm not sure. It's clear that while her English is good, there are probably some nuances she's still figuring out, little linguistic traps I need to avoid.

"I'm getting sidetracked. This is supposed to be about what I did.

"Anyway, to answer the earlier question about 'What would I do?' I asked her on a date tonight at the new Latin restaurant, the one with the live music and the incredible aroma of spices, and to my surprise, she said yes. She actually said yes! I'll update

more later, but I need to get home. I'm writing this in the grocery store parking lot, and my ice cream is melting, a casualty of my lingering excitement.

"Talk soon. I have so much more to tell you about this.

"And thank you for believing in me. I don't think I'll take up the offer on the mushroom experiments just yet. I think I might just have a chance to get through this on my own. And I guess I might reach out to Brent, tell him thank you. His poorly thought-out plan, his ridiculous scheme, actually got me a date with a beautiful woman. I don't think even he thought it would go that far, the idiot."

He sent the journal entry, a feeling of lightness washing over him. The bags of frozen items, including the aforementioned ice cream, sat melting slightly in his back seat, a testament to his distraction. Hours later, after settling at home and diligently putting away groceries, the ice cream saved from complete liquefaction, it was time to prepare for the biggest risk Jordan had taken in almost two years. A date. A real date.

Inside the Lambert/Miller home, in Jordan's bedroom/office, a space that felt both familiar and strangely alien in his current state of mind, Jordan tried on dress shirts, his nerves making it difficult to find anything that helped him "feel good." Each shirt felt wrong, too tight, too loose, the wrong color, nothing seemed to capture the hopeful energy swirling within him. His confidence, slowly building over the

past few weeks, was distracted by a sudden notification on his smartphone: a response from Dr. Martin to his latest journal entry. He picked up the phone, a knot of anticipation forming in his stomach.

"Oh my goodness, Jordan! I'm proud of you! This is such a big step you're taking!" the message from Angela Martin read, her words practically vibrating with enthusiasm. *"I don't want to ruin the moment for you, because I know how much this means, but in the interest of your well-being, and to ensure you're truly moving forward, I want you to just take a few things into consideration as you go through with this.*

"1. What is your hope for tonight? Are you taking this as an opportunity to genuinely get to meet someone new, to build a fresh connection, or are you inadvertently taking shade in the new light of Courtney's shadow? Be honest with yourself about your intentions.

"2. It is obvious the resemblance between Mila and Courtney is uncanny. I've seen the pictures, Jordan. But ask yourself this: can you look at Mila and truly see her, for who she is, as an individual? And by extension, is Mila someone you would still be interested in if the physical resemblance wasn't there, if she looked completely different? What truly draws you to her?

"3. Perhaps most importantly, if you and Mila met under more normal circumstances, not through the intensity of that past event, but in a casual, everyday setting, would she still be

interested in you? Is this connection built on genuine chemistry, or on the unusual circumstances of your meeting?

"I don't expect you to have an answer to these questions now, Jordan, and please don't take this as me saying you shouldn't go through with this date. I am actually quite proud of you! This is a monumental step for you! Just remember to take these things into consideration so neither you nor Mila run into unreasonable expectations and spoil what could be an amazing, truly transformative connection between you two. Be safe and have fun. I'm looking forward to hearing how well it goes! Call me tomorrow!

"All the best,

"Dr. Angela Martin"

A thoughtful frown creased Jordan's brow as he read the message. Dr. Martin was right, of course. She always was. He needed to be careful, to be honest with himself about his motivations. This wasn't about Courtney, or at least, it couldn't be. This was about Mila. He took a deep breath, trying to compartmentalize the anxieties and focus on the excitement.

Sheryl Miller passed Jordan's doorway, noticing his unusually groomed self, a rare sight these days. "Hey, what's got you all pretty?" she asked, a hint of surprise, perhaps even suspicion, in her voice.

Jordan was reluctant to share, knowing his mother's reactions all too well. "I, uh... have a date." He braced himself.

"Really? Who's the girl?" Sheryl pressed, her voice sharpening, a predatory curiosity entering her tone.

Jordan swallowed hard, the truth a bitter pill he knew would ignite a storm. Lying was a burden he no longer wished to carry, so with a reluctant sigh, he confessed, the words like ash on his tongue, "Her name is Mila... the girl from the strip club..."

Sheryl's hands balled into tight fists at the mention of the strip club, a raw flicker of anger and deep-seated pain flashing in her eyes. The chaotic, violent aftermath of that night, which had nearly cost Jordan everything, was a memory etched in her mind. Her voice, thin and laced with thinly veiled accusation, wavered as she questioned, "Are you sure that's a good idea, being that she's the reason you lost control... again?!" The last word was spat out, a stinging indictment that hung heavy in the air between them.

Jordan's temper flared instantly, a hot rush of indignation toward his mother. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" His voice dropped, low and dangerous, a clear warning.

"It just seems like when you meet that girl, you can't control yourself," Sheryl countered condescendingly, her gaze narrow and judgmental. "And I don't want to lose my job

because you think with your dick!" Her words were a calculated strike, designed to wound, aimed directly at his pride and his perceived lack of self-control.

Jordan's fists clenched, his knuckles turning white as his jaw tightened. "So, Miss 911..." he began, his voice dripping with sarcasm, a bitter retort. "You think I should've just let her get raped? How would that little tidbit affect your job, doing nothing? Would that be better for your precious reputation?" He watched, a grim satisfaction building, as Sheryl's composure began to crack.

Sheryl, clearly not expecting the backlash, the direct hit on her own perceived righteousness, clenched her fists and gritted her teeth. Her usual calm demeanor was shattered, replaced by a visible struggle for control.

"No, no, this is going down," Jordan retorted, his voice rising, raw with pent-up frustration. "How come every single time Paisley screws up, you defend her? You bail her out! Yet, just because I'm a fucking man, you are eager to leave me in the fucking ditch! You twist every little thing like you're the damn victim, even when I had to defend myself. So, unless there's something you're not telling me, shut up!" The words poured out, a torrent of long-held resentment.

Sheryl's eyes practically bulged in disbelief and fury as she slammed her fist into the wall with a resounding thud. But to Jordan's surprise, the anger seemed to dissipate, replaced by

a sudden calm. She took several deep, deliberate breaths, as if to regain her composure. "Jordan," she said, her voice surprisingly softer, almost hesitant. "The owner of that nightclub was found dead at a construction site..."

The complete 180 in the situation stunned Jordan, his previous anger momentarily forgotten. Shocked, he asked, "What? When?" The shift in conversation was jarring, unexpected.

"They found him last night," Sheryl explained, her gaze fixed on him. "I don't know much, and don't you dare say anything, but they don't think he was killed there. I think it was some supervisor who found him sticking out in wet concrete." The grim details painted a chilling picture, and Jordan immediately understood the implications.

This information meant his outburst at the nightclub was likely coming under observation, casting a dark cloud over his upcoming date. "Great... last thing I needed on this date was stalkers in blue..." he muttered, the irony not lost on him.

Sheryl leaned her head into the doorframe, almost apologetic at her earlier remarks, a rare display of empathy. "Are you sure you still want to go out?" she asked, her voice tinged with concern.

Jordan sighed, his face a canvas of conflicting emotions. The date felt suddenly complicated, burdened by the unex-

pected news. Sheryl, sensing his internal struggle, began to walk away. "Oh... kay," she said, her voice high-pitched and condescending, a passive-aggressive trigger for Jordan—which Sheryl knew and used openly. Her tone, practically emulating the sound of nails on a chalkboard, grated on his nerves.

Jordan rolled his eyes, realizing how futile any further arguments would be. Muttering under his breath, he said, "If you ever get to see her, maybe you'll understand why I have to go..." The words were barely audible, a private justification for a decision that felt increasingly unavoidable.

Later that night, just in time for the date, Mila, walking down a bustling city street, presented a striking figure. She was dressed in a skin-tight beige dress that perfectly accented her figure, drawing appreciative glances. Her hair, straightened to an almost doll-like perfection, seemed to shimmer in the evening light, complementing the scattered sequins on the black cover draped elegantly over her shoulders.

Her subtle mannerisms, the way she carried herself, hinted at a parallel mental struggle with Jordan's, allowing her to quickly discern his pain compared to others around him. The visual was stunning, a young woman glimmering with hope for a new romance. Mila shifted a small purse from over her shoulder to her front as she reached inside, her fingers checking instinctively to see if she remembered to pack her stun gun. It was a small, almost unconscious gesture, betraying a hidden layer of caution.

In the parking lot outside "Azúcar & Fire Latin Food Restaurant," Jordan stood by his truck, waiting for Mila. He had obviously taken great care with his appearance, dressed impeccably in a black suit, a crisp white button-up shirt, and polished black dress shoes. Though visibly nervous for the date, his demeanor was surprisingly calm, a quiet anticipation building within him.

Even as he saw Mila at the edge of the lot, his heart didn't pound with anxiety, but raced with a mix of excitement and captivation by her appearance. His focus faded, as if the elusive odds of such an encounter with the spitting image of his lost fiancée couldn't help but speak up, his attention drawn to yet another memory, one of his most treasured.

The scene through Jordan's eyes faded to a blurry, dreamlike memory, revealing Courtney in a shimmering black sequined dress, approaching Jordan, who was dressed in the very same outfit. They were meeting under a picturesque gazebo lit by strings of twinkling lights, nestled in the heart of a fragrant rose garden. Jordan gently took Courtney's hand, and they embraced, slowly letting themselves flow into a gentle dance as fireflies appeared around them, their soft glows mirroring the magic of the moment.

"I hope you're ready," Courtney Freeman's voice echoed in his memory, a sweet, clear sound.

The kiss lingered in Jordan's memory, a sweet echo of Courtney's presence. He was lost in it until Mila's actual presence, both loving and nervous, gently drew him back to the present moment.

"My... you look amazing," Jordan stammered, his voice laced with nerves, a slight tremor in his tone.

Mila blushed, a delicate flush spreading across her cheeks, and gracefully brushed her hair aside. "Thank you. So do you!" she replied, her smile bright and genuine.

His throat tightened, but Jordan forced a chuckle, gesturing towards the restaurant door. "Shall we head inside? I'm not very good at this part, so maybe we can let the food break the ice?" The suggestion was a thinly veiled attempt to alleviate his own awkwardness.

Mila giggled, a light, melodious sound. "Yes, let's go. I am hungry." Her enthusiasm was infectious.

They walked side by side, Jordan doing his best to be the perfect gentleman, opening the door for her with a flourish. The rich, invigorating aromas of Latin dishes immediately enveloped them, a welcome distraction from their burgeoning date anxieties and the lingering tension from earlier.

A friendly waitress approached, menus in hand. "Table for two?" she asked, her smile welcoming.

Jordan smiled back. "Yes please." He gestured for Mila to lead the way, and she smiled as they followed the waitress to an empty table. He pulled out a chair for Mila, helping her settle in comfortably before taking his own seat.

"Shall I get you two something to drink?" the waitress asked, pen poised over her notepad.

Mila smiled brightly. "A white wine, please."

Jordan glanced at the drink menu, a flicker of responsibility in his eyes. "Just a cola for me, gotta drive."

The waitress jotted down the order with a cheerful, "Gotcha, I will be back to get your order!" She then walked away, leaving them to peruse their menus.

While they waited, both Jordan and Mila perused their menus, their eyes occasionally drawn to delicious-looking pastas passing them by, carried by other waitstaff.

"It smells wonderful here!" Mila exclaimed, inhaling deeply, her hunger growing with every tantalizing scent.

Jordan smiled. "Yes, it does. Anything stand out to you?"

Another waitress passed with a pasta dish that snagged both their attention, prompting them to search for it on their menus.

"Do you know what you want?" Mila asked.

"Oh yes!" Jordan declared, having found it: Fideos del Amor, or "Noodles of Love." The description read: "Hand-rolled fettuccine tossed in a creamy roasted poblano and garlic sauce, with a hint of smoked paprika. Topped with slow-cooked pulled mojo chicken, caramelized onions, and a drizzle of lime crema. Garnished with fresh cilantro and shaved cotija cheese."

Jordan folded his menu with a satisfied smile. Mila was still reading intently when the waitress returned with their drinks, pen and pad ready.

"A white wine for the lady, and a cola for the gentleman. Have you decided what you're going to order?"

"I'm ready. Do you want to order first?" Jordan offered, glancing at Mila. She tilted her menu toward the waitress, pointing.

"I'll have... this..." Mila said, struggling slightly with the pronunciation, a detail Jordan noted as he took a sip of his drink.

"Excellent choice, dear!" the waitress chirped. "And what about you, sir?"

"I'll take the 'Noodles of Love.'"

The waitress gushed. "Awww, that's sweet. First date?"

Mila and Jordan exchanged a blushing glance.

The waitress's jaw dropped. "You two are adorable. Two orders of Fideos del Amor, coming up!"

Jordan watched, eyes wide, as the waitress took their order to the kitchen.

"You ordered it too?" he asked, a smile playing on his lips.

Mila's smile mirrored his. "It looks delicious!"

They both laughed, a shared moment of synchronicity, and in that laughter, emotional walls began to crumble. Jordan playfully wiped his face as the last of their mirth subsided, a lingering warmth in his eyes. After a few moments, Mila's gaze drifted down the table, a subtle shift in her expression.

"Is something wrong?" Jordan asked, a note of concern in his voice, his brow furrowing slightly.

Mila wiped a stray tear from her eye, a ghost of a smile playing on her lips, and looked at him. "No, everything is okay. It has been a long time since I could laugh at something with such abandon."

"Your mystery deepens..." Jordan said, curiosity lacing his tone, a playful glint in his eyes as he leaned forward slightly.

Mila simply smiled, a knowing look in her gaze. "You're the mystery, Jordan."

"Well, we're here," Jordan began, a slight hesitation in his voice as he gestured around the intimate restaurant. "Much to my surprise, after all that's happened, you said yes to the date. I may as well be upfront with you, Mila."

"I appreciate honesty," Mila replied, her voice soft but firm. "To tell you the truth, I'm still trying to understand what it was I saw that night. Where did you learn to fight like that? Were you in the military?"

Jordan took a deep breath, a flicker of something unreadable in his eyes before he met her gaze. "No, I wasn't. But the people who trained me used to be Navy Seals, former CIA, NSA—jobs like that. They taught me how to handle myself in... difficult situations."

Mila's eyes widened in surprise, a gasp catching in her throat. "Were you a spy, then?"

Jordan laughed, a genuine, unburdened sound, and shook his head. "No. I don't really care much for corporate or political motivations getting in the way of being in the field. I was a bounty hunter; paid to track down criminals who thought

they could outrun the law. And when I wasn't doing that, I assisted with private investigations. There were some cases I took on that became particularly dangerous; so I became even worse so I could make it home at night." He paused, a shadow crossing his face.

"Did something happen to you?" Mila pressed, her voice gentle, sensing the unspoken weight of his words.

Jordan's words caught in his throat, a visible struggle between the desire to be honest and the fear of ruining the evening's delicate mood. He stuttered, "Uh, yeah... something that changed everything and I had to leave it behind. Though, as you saw, some things still linger. I've done my best to try to walk away from that life; built up my own company with some of the skills I developed in the field. But, the shift hasn't been easy. I ended up having to move back home, been trying to help my mom and sister out with their insanity." He offered a weak, self-deprecating smile.

Mila sensed Jordan's hesitation to delve further into his past. The way he tucked his face, avoiding eye contact, revealed a man struggling mentally with old wounds. She wanted to dig deeper, to offer comfort, but didn't want to upset him or push him further into his shell. She looked him deep in the eye, a silent understanding passing between them.

"That is admirable of you," she said softly, her voice filled with genuine warmth. "But, if it is not too personal, can I ask why did you leave when you saw my face at the club?"

Jordan sighed, a heavy exhale that seemed to carry the weight of unspoken burdens, and began to adjust himself in his seat, his hand instinctively reaching for his wallet. Mila, concerned she had upset him and that she had overstepped, started to worry, her eyes wide. "Are you leaving? I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked that. Please, stay."

Jordan opened his wallet, his fingers trembling slightly, and pulled out a faded photo of himself and another woman, a bittersweet expression on his face. "Mila, it's okay. If I was in your shoes that night, I'd want to know what happened too." He held up the photo, fighting the hesitation to reveal the raw, painful truth. "But, it would probably be easier if I showed you."

He handed the photo to Mila, his uneasiness evident in the subtle tremor of his hand. Mila took a look, her jaw dropping at the uncanny resemblance to herself. "What... she's beautiful. Who is she, Jordan?"

"That was my fiancée, Courtney," Jordan replied, his voice barely a whisper, thick with unaddressed grief.

Mila's voice was nervous, a sudden chill running down her spine as the pieces began to click into place. "She... she looks

just like me. I see now." She handed the photo back to Jordan, her mind racing. "So you're married, then?"

Jordan shook his head, a pained expression distorting his features. "No. She... she passed away a little over two years ago before we really had a chance to even plan anything."

"What happened to her?" Mila asked, her voice hushed, a wave of empathy washing over her.

Jordan's heart began to race at the question, his breathing becoming shallow. "She... she and our unborn baby were murdered. Her killer was never found." His gaze drifted, unfocused, lost in the torment of that memory.

Mila, seeing Jordan's profound pain, felt a tear well up in her own eye, a pang of sorrow echoing within her.

"My god, that is awful. I'm so sorry, Jordan." Jordan wiped his eye, a single tear escaping, and carefully returned the photograph to his wallet, as if protecting a fragile piece of his soul.

"Is that why you came to the club that night?" Mila asked, her face a complicated tapestry of concern, anger, and confusion, the realization of the resemblance hitting her with full force.

"No," Jordan admitted, his voice strained. "My friend, Brent, apparently saw you there and thought buying me a pri-

vate dance would 'help me move on'..." He trailed off, disgusted by the memory.

"That's... not okay, Jordan," Mila's voice was tight with indignation, a spark of anger in her eyes.

"Yeah," Jordan sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Believe me, his judgment seems cloudy these days. We had words about it."

"Is... is that why you wanted to ask me on a date, then?" Mila's gaze sharpened, a hint of suspicion in her eyes, a fear that she was merely a stand-in for someone else. "Because I look like her?"

Jordan took a moment, considering his answer carefully, his eyes meeting hers with a newfound sincerity. "Mila, I asked you out because the way you tried to help me that night spoke volumes about who you are. I know from personal experience; when someone is able to see the struggle that easily, especially when they stay around, they usually have a story of their own, a depth that few possess. And, if I may be completely honest," he leaned forward slightly, a genuine warmth radiating from him, "there is an elegance about you and the way you carry yourself that stood out and made me want to know more about the woman behind the face."

A soft, hesitant smile graced Mila's lips, and she blinked rapidly to hide the sudden sheen in her eyes, touched by his

earnestness and vulnerability. "This, Jordan, this is precisely why I wanted to see you again."

"What do you mean?" Jordan asked, leaning forward, his curiosity piqued.

Mila's composure began to fray, tears welling, and her natural accent, usually carefully masked, started to break through. "Jordan, even after you attacked those men, you treated me with kindness and respect. Most men never saw me as more than a piece of meat. I told you before, you didn't belong in that place. You are different. A real man."

Seeing her emotion, Jordan couldn't resist. He rose from his chair, kneeling beside Mila, and offered a warm embrace. Touched and surprised by the gesture, Mila wrapped her arms around him, a silent understanding passing between them. Time seemed to slow, the room around them brightening as if a new light had been kindled, chasing away the shadows of their pasts.

Jordan pulled away, looking deep into Mila's eyes. The gaze that had once shaken him to his core was now filled with a tender, nascent love, a mirror reflecting his own burgeoning feelings. Emotional walls crumbled, layer by layer, revealing the true selves they had hidden from the world. They were seeing each other, truly seeing each other, for who they were, beyond the masks they wore.

Jordan returned to his seat, a natural smile on his face, the ease of their connection settling comfortably around them. Mila wiped her tears, then offered a small, self-deprecating joke. "I'm sorry you saw me weak."

"You have nothing to apologize for, Mila," Jordan said softly, his voice a gentle balm. "If anything, you seem like a woman who had to be strong for too long, carrying burdens that were never meant for one person to bear."

"You can see that?" Mila's voice was laced with interest, a flicker of surprise in her eyes that someone could perceive the struggles she so carefully concealed.

"I can see quite a bit. Just like how I know there's a stun gun in your purse," he revealed, a slight smile playing on his lips, a testament to his keen observation. "Which, I don't blame you. I figured between the kinds of men you normally handle, and maybe anxiety about me, something big happened to you. I also noticed a hint of an accent in your voice that sneaks out from time to time, a melody that hints at a distant homeland. You're from Ukraine?"

Mila was impressed by Jordan's astute observations, her carefully constructed facade momentarily slipping. Her face fell slightly, hinting at inner turmoil and a story she found difficult to share, a burden she carried close to her heart. She nodded. "I am. I came to the United States to stay with my mother and younger brother when the Russians invaded my

country." The words were spoken with a quiet resignation, the weight of displacement evident in her tone.

Jordan sat back, a shocked expression on his face, the gravity of her statement settling heavily in the air. "My god..."

The tense moment was interrupted by a cheerful waitress approaching their table, bearing a tray with their order, a welcome distraction. "Alright, two orders of Fideos del Amor for the budding couple! Careful these are hot." Steam rose from the large bowls of pasta, its inviting aroma filling the air, as Jordan helped the waitress set them on the table. She chuckled, a warm, genuine sound. "Thank you, sir. Would you two like anything else?"

"I'm good for now," Jordan said with a smile, his eyes still lingering on Mila. "Mila?"

Mila shook her head, attempting to mask her emotions with a polite smile for the waitress, her inner turmoil still simmering beneath the surface.

"Alrighty! I'll leave you two be then!" The waitress smiled and nodded before departing, leaving them once more in their intimate bubble.

A calming sensation washed over Jordan and Mila as the inviting aroma of the Fideos del Amor filled their noses, a comforting embrace amidst their heavy conversation. They

both took a bite, immediately finding joy in the rich, savory taste, a small moment of shared pleasure.

"This is amazing!" Jordan exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. "I'm glad we picked this spot."

Mila, her mouth still full, nodded in enthusiastic agreement, the delicious food a momentary reprieve.

"Listen, Mila," Jordan began, his voice gentle, his gaze serious. "I don't want you to feel uncomfortable. If you don't want to talk about what happened with your family, I'll respect it. Your comfort is what matters most to me."

Mila offered a soft smile, a fragile bloom of trust. "It's okay. I trust you." She wiped her face, bracing herself to tell the rest of her story, to lay bare the vulnerabilities she so rarely showed.

"Mother was already sick, so her finding work here has been hard on the family. It felt like I was under the same fate, so I started to sell pictures of myself online to try to help everyone get by. I never have any money for myself. It just felt so disgraceful, and the things that men say to me are just evil. Even when I got the job offer to dance at the club, it just feels wrong. But, it made the money so my family can have what they need." Mila's carefully chosen English began to crack under the pressure, her native voice breaking through, imbued with the raw emotion of her confession.

"What keeps driving you to do it?" Jordan asked, his voice a gentle inquiry, his gaze unwavering.

"My father..." Mila choked back a sob, the memory a fresh wound. "His last words to me were to be strong. But if he knew what I was doing, he would disown me!" She tried desperately to hold back her tears, not wanting to break down in the middle of the restaurant, clinging to the last vestiges of her composure. Jordan gently placed his hand on top of hers, drawing her attention, a silent anchor in her storm.

"Mila," he said softly, his voice firm yet compassionate, "forgive me if I seem too direct, but I don't think your father would go that far..." His words hung in the air, a gentle challenge to the raw fear that gripped her. He reached out, his hand hovering, then gently touched her arm, a comforting gesture.

"He would!" Mila's voice was a desperate cry, a plea for him to understand the depths of her fear, the very real threats that loomed over her and her family. Her eyes, wide and glistening with unshed tears, pleaded with him to grasp the gravity of her situation.

"Mila!" Jordan's voice was stern, cutting through her panic, but his gaze locked onto hers, demanding her attention. It was a quiet force of conviction, an anchor in her storm. "If I may be honest, if my daughter had gotten involved

in that type of work... I, personally, would be more worried about her safety. But I would also be damn proud of her for being willing to make that sacrifice to keep going. You're willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for people you love. As long as that's the reason in your heart, your family should be proud of you. They would see your strength, your unwavering love, not your perceived weakness." His words, heartfelt and resonant, began to chip away at the fortress of her despair. He saw not a victim, but a survivor, a protector.

Touched by Jordan's words, a wave of profound relief washing over her, like a soothing balm on a wound, Mila took a sip of her wine, trying to calm herself, to absorb the unexpected comfort he offered. A fragile smile touched her lips. "Thank you for the kind words. I do hope you are right. And I'm sorry for being so weak, it just feels like I have no one to talk to about this." Her voice was barely a whisper, a confession of loneliness.

Jordan, tears welling in his own eyes, a mirror to her vulnerability and the shared human experience of pain and resilience, smiled, a genuine, heartfelt expression that radiated warmth and understanding. "You have me... for as long as you want me around." His simple statement held a weight of promise, an offer of unwavering support.

Mila's smile seemed to brighten the entire room as it grew, a radiant light dispelling the lingering shadows that had clung to her. "I would like that. More than anything." The unspo-

ken connection between them deepened, a silent acknowledgment of a burgeoning bond.

Hours later, the parking lot outside "Azúcar & Fire Latin Food Restaurant" was bathed in the low, amber light of a setting sun, casting long, dancing shadows that stretched and swayed with the gentle evening breeze. Jordan and Mila, still lost in conversation, felt an unspoken connection, a profound sense of familiarity, as if they'd known each other for a lifetime, their souls recognizing a kindred spirit. The initial awkwardness of a first date had long since dissipated, replaced by an easy camaraderie and a deepening affection that hummed between them. They talked about everything and nothing, sharing snippets of their lives, their dreams, their fears, each revelation drawing them closer.

Jordan, captivated by the fading light and the beautiful woman beside him, voiced an idea that had been stirring within him. "Hey, I know it's getting late, but... I'd really hate to end things now. There's so much more I want to know about you." He looked at her, his eyes full of genuine curiosity and a nascent admiration.

Mila smirked, her eyes sparkling with amusement and intrigue, a hint of playfulness dancing within them. "What do you have in mind?" Her voice was low and inviting.

"You willing to come with me to a secluded spot, watch the sunset?" Jordan asked, his voice soft, almost a whisper, the in-

timacy of the suggestion hanging in the air, a delicate invitation to a shared moment of beauty.

Mila's smile was radiant, a beacon of joy. "Only if you send it to me once it's taken." Her playful condition hung in the air, a delightful challenge.

Jordan grinned, a warmth spreading through him. He helped to position them so the shimmering waters of the nearby river and the magnificent hues of the setting sun formed a breathtaking backdrop. He pulled out his phone, opened the camera, and with a gentle click, snapped the photo as Mila rested her head on his shoulder, a perfect, unposed moment of tender intimacy.

"How does it look?" Mila asked, her voice laced with anticipation, her gaze still fixed on the horizon.

Jordan opened the photo and showed her, a tearful smile gracing his features. It was more than just a picture; it was a snapshot of their budding connection, a tangible memory of an unforgettable evening. "Perfect." He meant it in every sense of the word.

He quickly forwarded the picture to Mila, and together they found a spot to sit beneath the comforting canopy of a sprawling oak tree, its ancient branches offering a silent embrace. They simply admired the fading sunset, its colors bleeding across the sky in a symphony of oranges, purples, and deep

reds. Mila nestled herself as close to Jordan as possible, drawing comfort from his presence, a sense of safety she hadn't felt in a long time.

"Thank you, Jordan, for tonight," Mila murmured, her voice filled with an affection that touched him deeply, a soft whisper that spoke volumes.

Jordan smiled, his heart swelling with a quiet contentment. "It feels like I should be thanking you, truthfully." He truly meant it; she had brought a light into his life he hadn't realized was missing.

Mila's brow furrowed in thought, a serious expression settling on her face. "You truly are a good man. I want to be there for you, as you were for me, even though we still don't really know each other well." She paused, her gaze vulnerable, a silent plea in her eyes. Jordan gently brushed her cheek with his hand, a tender gesture that spoke of care and understanding. "Just... don't hurt me like other men have." Mila leaned into his touch, allowing herself a rare moment of profound vulnerability, letting down her guard in a way she seldom did.

Part of Jordan felt a fleeting thought that she might be getting swept up in the moment, that perhaps her emotions were running high. Yet, the undeniable sense that she might genuinely need a connection to navigate whatever lay ahead ignited his protective instincts. He felt an undeniable compul-

sion to be there for her, to be the steady anchor she clearly craved.

"We have a long road ahead of us as this journey is only beginning," Jordan said, his voice soft but resolute, a promise woven into every syllable. "There may be times we are tested, times when external forces or our own doubts might try to pull us apart." He paused, his smile growing, a genuine warmth radiating from him. "I cannot deny your beauty, it's something that outshines the myths of love goddesses, a light that illuminates everything around you. But having gotten to know you better, I can say you're stronger than you realized. Even if I were to somehow hurt you—which I pray I never do—I'd spend a long time making things right. You deserve the best, and I'd be a moron to not give every effort to be my best for you, to treat you with the respect and love you truly deserve."

Mila, deeply touched by Jordan's earnest confession, by the sincerity in his voice and the depth of his gaze, leaned in and initiated a long, passionate kiss. It was a kiss that spoke volumes—of gratitude for his honesty, of a burgeoning desire that had been simmering beneath the surface, and of a shared promise for a future they were only just beginning to imagine. Jordan was initially caught off guard, a breath hitched in his throat, but finding no reason to resist the intoxicating pull, he allowed himself to fully surrender to the moment. His arms instinctively wrapped around her waist, pulling her closer, deepening the embrace until their bodies were pressed flush

against each other. The world outside them faded into a distant hum, leaving only the two of them, enveloped in the magic of the deepening twilight and the electric current of their undeniable connection. Each touch, each gentle sigh, was a silent affirmation of the bond forming between them, a fragile but beautiful beginning.

Hours later, the riverside park was bathed in the soft, ethereal glow of twilight. The air, crisp and cool, carried the rich, earthy scent of damp soil after a long day, mingled with the delicate, intoxicating fragrance of blooming night flowers. Mila rested contentedly in Jordan's lap, her body curled comfortably against his, enveloped in the protective warmth of his embrace. Her head was nestled against his chest, rising and falling with the steady rhythm of his breaths.

The comfortable silence that settled between them was punctuated only by the distant, rhythmic chirping of crickets and the gentle, almost imperceptible rustle of leaves stirred by a fleeting breeze. Jordan gently kissed her forehead, a featherlight touch that was a silent acknowledgment that their date, though still young and filled with such sweet promise, would soon have to end—a thought neither of them welcomed, clinging to every last precious moment as if they could somehow prolong time itself.

The quiet, serene moment shattered abruptly with the sudden, jarring ring of Jordan's phone. Its harsh, intrusive sound echoed loudly in the tranquil evening, a stark contrast

to the peaceful atmosphere they had cultivated. He shifted, a soft sigh escaping his lips, and retrieved the vibrating device from his pocket.

"Who's calling you?" Mila asked, her voice a soft murmur against the quiet night, tinged with a hint of curiosity.

"My mother..." Jordan replied, a confused frown creasing his brow as he glanced at the caller ID, a flicker of apprehension crossing his features.

Mila sat up, her eyes questioning, sensing a sudden shift in his demeanor. "Are you going to answer?"

"I probably should," he said, a distinct note of unease entering his voice, a prickle of intuition telling him something was amiss. "Something doesn't feel right..."

He answered, bringing the phone to his ear, and Sheryl's voice, though faint and muffled, carried distinctly to Mila, the urgency in her tone unmistakable.

"Hello?" Jordan's voice was tight with anticipation, a sudden tension gripping him. "...Is she okay? ...Where is she now? ...Alright, I'll be there as soon as I can." His words were clipped, his focus entirely on the voice on the other end, his expression growing increasingly grim.

He hung up, drawing a deep, worried breath that seemed to weigh heavily in the silence. The weight of the news, whatever it was, settled upon him like a suffocating blanket, his shoulders slumping.

"What is wrong?" Mila asked, her own voice now tinged with genuine worry, her hand reaching out to touch his arm.

"My sister," Jordan began, his voice barely above a whisper, raw with shock and concern. "She was hit in a drive-by shooting..."

Mila's eyes widened in shock, her breath catching in her throat. "My god, Jordan, is she okay?" Her voice was laced with disbelief and a rising sense of panic.

He nodded, a flicker of profound relief momentarily easing the tension in his gaze. "She wasn't hurt; it was just her car that got hit. Apparently, she was out on a date with another boyfriend of hers when it happened." The last part was delivered with a hint of exasperation, but the underlying relief was palpable.

Mila hugged him tightly, offering what comfort she could, her arms wrapping around him in a warm, reassuring embrace. "You should go be with your family, make sure everyone is okay." Her voice was gentle but firm, understanding the gravity of the situation.

"But, Mila..." Jordan began, a reluctant protest forming on his lips, unwilling to end their evening, to break the spell they had woven. But Mila silenced his objections with a tender, understanding kiss, a soft brush of her lips against his.

"Go, it's okay," she murmured, her gaze unwavering, filled with empathy and understanding. "Family is important. Just, give me a call later to tell me how everyone is, okay?"

Mila's gentle smile, full of warmth and compassion, made it difficult for Jordan to maintain his initial resolve to stay. He knew, deep down, that she was right. His family needed him.

"Can I at least offer you a ride home?" he asked, a desperate need to ensure her safety, to cling to their connection for a few more moments. "Just so I know you're okay."

Mila hugged him tightly once more, a grateful squeeze, then slowly began to stand, the peaceful intimacy of their date now replaced by an urgent reality. "I would like that," she said, her voice soft but clear.

Jordan's truck screeched through the city streets, the tires protesting as he navigated the turns with a speed born of urgent worry, before finally coming to a halt outside Mila's apartment building. The urgency of the situation was palpable, a thick, almost suffocating presence in the confined space of the truck. Mila, understanding the unspoken need for speed, hurried out of the vehicle and towards the building

door, her steps quick and purposeful. Jordan, visibly on edge, his jaw clenched, tapped his thumbs restlessly against the steering wheel before finally putting the truck in park and getting out, unable to just drive away.

"Mila! Wait!" Jordan shouted, his voice rough with concern, rushing towards her as she was about to enter the building. She turned, a fresh wave of worry washing over her when he reached her and pulled her into one more tight, almost desperate hug.

"Are you going to be okay, with your work?" he asked, his voice tight with concern, a flicker of panic in his eyes as he thought of the dangerous nature of her job.

"I'll be okay, Jordan. I have to do what I have to, for my family," Mila replied, her voice firm despite the subtle tremor she could feel in her hands, a testament to the weight of her responsibilities. A deep breath steadied her, and she met his gaze, a silent promise in her eyes that she wouldn't break.

Jordan sighed, a heavy sound that carried the burden of his fears, and Mila caught the raw panic in his eyes, a mirroring of the worry she felt for him. "I know you do, and it's not my place to deter you. Just...just be careful, okay?" His voice was a plea, a genuine fear for her safety etched on his face, lines of concern deepening around his eyes. He reached out, his hand hovering, wanting to comfort her but unsure how.

Mila reached up, her hand gently touching his cheek, her fingers tracing the line of his jaw. The warmth of his skin against hers was a small comfort. “Do you want to see me again, Jordan?” Her question hung in the air, a testament to the unspoken questions that lingered between them, the fragile hope of a future they were just beginning to imagine.

He looked genuinely confused by her question, his brow furrowing as if the very idea was preposterous. “Of course I do.” His answer was immediate, unequivocal, a reassurance that settled some of the anxiety in her chest.

“Then whatever happens,” she said, her gaze steady and unwavering, radiating a quiet strength, “we will be strong together.” Mila leaned in and kissed him, a soft, lingering gesture that helped to calm the frantic beating of his heart, though it didn’t entirely erase the underlying source of his worries. It was a promise, a silent vow that no matter what challenges lay ahead, they would face them, together. The kiss was a silent plea, a comfort, a lifeline.

“Mila... I wish it was something small that was bothering me,” Jordan confessed, his voice barely a whisper, a tremor running through it. He pulled back slightly, his eyes shadowed.

Mila tilted her head, a concerned frown creasing her brow. “What is it? You can tell me.” She squeezed his hand gently, urging him to share his burden.

Jordan took her hand, his grip surprisingly strong, a deep sigh escaping him. "The owner of Forgotten Desires, he was murdered." The words were a stark, cold pronouncement that shattered the fragile peace they had found.

Mila's eyes widened, a gasp catching in her throat. The casual mention of murder sent a shiver down her spine. "What? How do you know?"

"One of my informants from when I was a bounty hunter was my mother. She worked as a police dispatcher for many years," Jordan explained, his voice low, a grim note of resignation in it. "She would often give me information on whatever was happening in the area if she thought it could be connected to a case I was working. Even though I left that life, she still feeds me information. That's how I know. He was dumped in a construction zone, someone tried to leave his body in wet cement." The gruesome details painted a vivid, disturbing picture in Mila's mind.

Mila found herself unable to form words, her thoughts a jumble of shock and disbelief. "Jordan, I..." she stammered, searching for something to say, something to make sense of this sudden, violent intrusion into their evening.

"Just, please watch out for yourself, okay?" Jordan interrupted, his grip tightening on her hand, his eyes pleading. "I am truly sorry to tell you this, and that our date was cut off.

But the timing of when we met, and everything else, I can't ignore the feeling that something may happen. And... I really don't want to lose you so soon after just getting to really know you." His voice cracked with emotion, betraying the depth of his fear.

Mila could see Jordan's eyes welling up, a raw vulnerability she hadn't seen before. He was scared, a feeling she knew all too well, a familiar ache in her own heart. "I will, Jordan. As long as you do the same! Now go check on your family, and call me later to tell me how everyone is." She reached up and kissed his cheek, a gentle, reassuring touch. Jordan, in return, kissed her forehead, a lingering touch that spoke volumes.

"Thank you again. This is the best night I've had in a long time..." Jordan said, a glimmer of hope in his voice, a faint smile playing on his lips despite the fear in his eyes. He squeezed her hand one last time, a silent goodbye, before he rushed back to his truck and drove off, the roar of the engine fading into the night.

Mila watched him go, a profound sense of unease settling over her. She wiped her face, feeling the lingering dampness of unshed tears, as she headed inside her apartment building. She was unaware she was being watched from across the street. Chris Mule and Tyler Laverty sat in a black muscle car, their eyes fixed on Mila as she disappeared into the building, two dark silhouettes against the city lights.

"I better tell boss that he just left..." Chris mumbled, pulling out his phone and starting to text Carlos Delgado, his fingers flying across the keypad.

He just left her apartment. She should be alone. What do we do?

As Chris sent the text, a nervous energy thrumming in the air, Tyler tapped him on the arm. "Chris, dude, any idea what Carlos wants this girl for? And why is he so worked up about some Goat Man?" Tyler's voice was a low murmur, filled with a mixture of confusion and fear.

Chris stared, stunned, his jaw dropping. "The fuck did you say?" His eyes widened in disbelief.

"I was trying to learn Spanish and it said that *Cabron* means Goat?" Tyler explained, oblivious to Chris's shock, his voice a mixture of innocent curiosity and a hint of paranoia. "And if the goat is Jordan, and he's so bad, won't he attack us like he did those bikers at the club because of what we did?" Tyler's rambling filled the tense silence, his mind clearly racing with wild theories.

Chris, too shocked to answer, shook his head, trying to ignore Tyler's rambling, his mind grappling with the implications of Tyler's mistaken translation. A reply from Carlos Delgado came through, the screen of the phone glowing ominously in the dim light.

"Not if we don't fuck around, you moron! Now get ready, boss said he needs us to go back and tie up a loose end." The message was curt, unforgiving.

"I thought we already drugged him!" Tyler protested, a whine in his voice, his eyes wide with a sudden, dawning realization.

"Just shut up!" Chris snapped, his voice sharp with frustration and a hint of fear, as he started the car and drove off, the muscle car peeling away from the curb and disappearing into the night, leaving behind only the lingering silence of the street.

6

Bloodied Moonlight

Jordan's old pickup truck rumbled to a stop outside his mother's suburban home, the familiar sight doing little to ease the knot of dread forming in his gut. His gaze, however, was immediately snagged by something far less familiar: a dark beige sedan, its once pristine exterior now marred by a constellation of angry, jagged bullet holes. A cold wave of unease washed over him. He killed the engine, the sudden silence amplifying the thumping in his chest, and stepped out. The late evening sun, usually a comforting presence, seemed to cast long, ominous shadows.

He approached the riddled vehicle cautiously, the scent of spent gunpowder faintly lingering in the air, a visceral reminder of violence. He knelt, his fingers tracing the jagged edges of a bullet hole in the driver's side door, a grim tableau of destruction. He tried to process the scene, but his mind refused to connect the dots.

Before he could properly assess the damage, a guttural scream tore through the quiet suburban air, ripping him from his troubled thoughts. Sheryl, his mother, burst from the house, her face a mask of contorted fury, her eyes blazing with an almost feral intensity. "You selfish son of a bitch, you're fucking hunting again, aren't you?!" Her voice, usually sharp and critical, was now a raw, unbridled shriek of accusation.

Jordan stood, slowly, bewilderment etched deeply onto his face. The words didn't make sense, twisting in his ears. "What the hell are you talking about?!" he demanded, his own voice tight with confusion and a burgeoning sense of irritation. "Where's Paisley?" His concern for his daughter, who should have been here, immediately outweighed the perplexing sight of the bullet-riddled car.

Sheryl's jaw clenched, a muscle jumping in her temple, her fists tightening at her sides until her knuckles were white. Her fury was a palpable force, radiating from her in waves. "Are you fucking hunting again?!" she repeated, her voice dripping with venomous accusation, ignoring his question about Paisley entirely. The repetition felt like a deliberate provocation, a refusal to acknowledge anything but her own rage.

"No, I'm fucking not!" Jordan shot back, his patience, already thin, now stretched to its absolute limit. The absurdity of the accusation, coupled with her deliberate avoidance of his question, ignited a spark of his own temper.

Sheryl advanced, her movements sharp and jerky, her fingers jabbing into Jordan's face with each word, each prod a physical manifestation of her venom. Her voice dropped to a low, menacing growl, vibrating with barely contained aggression. "Ever since you met that slut, that little bitch Mila, you have been out of control! I'm taking Paisley out of town before you get us killed just like you did Courtney!"

With every painful prod of Sheryl's finger, every vitriolic accusation, Jordan's anger intensified, simmering into a dangerous boil. The insinuation of Mila's involvement, the cruel twist of blaming her for some imagined transgression, sent him spiraling over the edge. It was a line she had crossed, a boundary shattered. He roared, a sound that was more animal than human, a raw outburst of pent-up fury. "Get your fucking finger out of my face before I break it! Don't you fucking dare bring her name into this!" His voice was hoarse, laced with a warning that was unmistakably serious.

Jordan's inner monster, a formidable beast he usually kept caged, meticulously hidden beneath layers of control and carefully constructed calm, clawed its way to the surface with terrifying speed. Sheryl saw it in his eyes, a flicker of something truly dark and dangerous, and for a fleeting moment, a glimmer of fear crossed her face. The mask of fury faltered, replaced by a momentary vulnerability. Yet, driven by some perverse need to dominate, to wound, she continued to provoke him, fanning the flames of his unleashed rage. "Fucking do it. I'll drown you, you fucking pig. I'll have cops here to

put you down." Her words were designed to sting, to belittle, to strip away any remaining semblance of his composure.

Jordan's gaze became colder, the heat of his initial rage congealing into something far more chilling. The monster was fully unleashed now, its presence radiating from him like an icy aura. "Do it," he challenged, his voice flat and devoid of any emotion, a stark contrast to his earlier roar. "Just fucking get it over with and do it. You've always treated me like shit because I'm a man, now here's your chance to make me the fucking monster you made me out to be." His words were a desperate, bitter plea, a challenge born of years of resentment and unspoken pain, offering her the chance to finally confirm her twisted narrative.

Sheryl, confronted by the sheer, unadulterated intensity of Jordan's rage, began to back away slowly, a flicker of genuine terror replacing her earlier bravado. The raw power emanating from him was overwhelming, leaving her, and any unseen observer, in a state of tense, suffocating fear. The air crackled with unspoken threats, with the very real possibility of violence. Would Jordan, pushed to the brink, cross an unforgivable line and harm his own mother? The question hung heavy in the air, a dreadful silence punctuated only by the rapid thumping of their hearts.

Before the answer could be revealed, before the fragile tension could shatter, the wail of sirens pierced the suburban quiet, a discordant shriek that signaled an abrupt shift in the

unfolding drama. A police cruiser, its lights flashing a frantic red and blue, sped toward the house, a beacon of authority cutting through the chaos. It screeched to a halt directly in front of them, kicking up a plume of dust. The driver's side door swung open, and Officer Caleb Winston emerged, his uniform crisp and imposing, his voice cutting through the thick tension with urgent clarity.

"Jordan! Come with me! Brent Harmon was killed."

Jordan's eyes widened, the raw fury that had consumed him replaced, in an instant, by a flicker of profound shock. The news, unexpected and devastating, hit him like a physical blow, temporarily shattering the monster's hold. The anger drained from his face, leaving behind a pallor of stunned disbelief. He took a hesitant step towards Caleb's cruiser, then turned back to Sheryl, his face still pale but his voice now stern and cold, devoid of the earlier rage but laced with a chilling finality. "Go now. Take your fucking little princess and go. Don't tell me where you're going, don't post it online, just go!" The urgency in his voice was undeniable, a desperate plea for her to disappear, to protect Paisley from whatever was coming.

The suburban street, still echoing with the raw confrontation, now held its breath. Sheryl, propelled by the terrifying reality that the situation extended far beyond her initial accusations to encompass actual death and police involvement, desperately retreated inside the house, the door slamming

shut behind her. Jordan, without a word, turned his back on the bullet-riddled car and the lingering tension, walking instead towards Caleb.-----At the scene, Caleb led Jordan through a grim tableau: a labyrinth of police tape, uniformed officers, and forensics crews meticulously documenting a violent struggle. Brent's apartment, already a chaotic reflection of a troubled mind, was now utterly tarnished, its already fragile order shattered into a thousand pieces by the violence that had unfolded within its walls.

Jordan's arrival rippled through the gathered onlookers, a silent wave of emotions among those familiar with his formidable reputation. Awe flickered in the wide eyes of some, tinged with disbelief, while others were gripped by a palpable, visceral fear. A silent few, however, maintained a chilling coldness in their gaze, a watchful, detached scrutiny that spoke volumes.

"Mind yourself," Caleb murmured to Jordan, his voice a low caution. "If you think you spot something, feel free to speak up, but there are still people here afraid of you getting back into action."

Jordan nodded, a silent acknowledgment, and together they moved into the living area. There, slumped on his couch, lay Brent's corpse, a needle protruding from his arm. A forensic technician, her movements practiced and precise, offered them nitrile gloves, which they both donned.

Despite his professional resolve to remain dispassionate, Jordan felt a searing pang of grief. Tears welled in his eyes, a stark betrayal of his intended stoicism, as he gazed upon his best friend, dead exactly as he had always feared Brent would be found.

"I'm sorry, Jordan..." Caleb began, his voice heavy with sympathy.

Jordan's voice, however, was a flat, emotionless monotone, a stark contrast to his inner turmoil. "It was only a matter of time."

From behind them, Detective Martin Jackson's voice cut through the solemn atmosphere, his presence immediately setting off Jordan's internal alarms. "I don't know why you'd bother with this bastard; it's clear this was just an ADJ..."

"Seriously, Jackson?" Caleb interjected, his voice laced with barely concealed annoyance. "Have some class, man."

Jordan leaned closer to Brent's lifeless body, his gaze sweeping over the intricate details that starkly contradicted Jackson's hasty, dismissive theory. "I know time on the job probably has made you callous, but for this to be another dead junkie..." Jordan tilted his head, his voice laced with a subtle challenge, "It would make more sense if the needle was actually in the vein."

"And who are you?" Martin Jackson's voice was gruff, an open challenge laced with annoyance.

"Someone who makes donut hogs like you look bad," Jordan retorted, his gaze unwavering, then turned to Caleb. "Can I borrow your body cam for just a minute?"

Caleb smirked, a fleeting expression of amusement directed at Jackson, before unclipping his body cam and handing it to Jordan. Jordan's fingers moved with practiced ease, clicking a button on the side of the camera, activating its night vision.

"What are you doing, J?" Caleb asked, a hint of curiosity in his tone, a slight tilt of his head.

"I'm not going to deny Brent had issues with drugs. But the placement of the needle doesn't look right," Jordan explained, his focus unwavering, his gaze still fixed on Brent's arm. "I figured others in the room might need crayons to understand; but we'll settle for infrared piercing through the top layers of skin."

Jordan gently, yet firmly, grabbed Brent's arm, rolling it to orient the veins more directly towards the camera's lens. Almost immediately, the infrared display on the body cam revealed a significant, undeniable gap between the needle puncture and the actual vein, a glaring contradiction to Jackson's initial assessment.

"Lucky guess," Jackson scoffed, a dismissive wave of his hand.

"Did you even see the bruising on his neck? Signs of burst blood vessels in the eyes?" Jordan challenged, his voice rising, as he pointed out the tell-tale signs to both Caleb and Detective Jackson on Brent's body. As Jordan looked around the room, his eyes sharp and observant, he made a mental note of Brent's trashed gaming setup, a scene of deliberate destruction rather than accidental disarray.

"Also, Brent was a compulsive gamer; literally ruined an engagement to a woman way out of his league because he couldn't put the controller down. It is highly unlikely he'd let his electronic get smashed around like that." Jordan observed his surroundings, his mind actively piecing together the fragments of the scene, trying to mentally recreate the moments leading up to Brent's death. The chaos in the room, he realized, spoke not of a drug overdose, but of a desperate struggle, a violent altercation that had left its brutal mark. The overturned furniture, the shattered lamp, the scattered remnants of Brent's life – it painted a picture far grimmer than a simple drug-induced stupor.

"Alright, wise guy, if you think this tweaker was killed... who did it?" Jackson's voice was laced with challenge, his arms crossed, a defiant posture that screamed skepticism. His eyes,

though, held a flicker of curiosity, a grudging acknowledgment that Jordan's observations were not easily dismissed.

"I know it's a stereotype, but constantly donut-fondling is bad for your eyesight," Jordan said, his voice edged with annoyance, a thinly veiled jab at Jackson's stereotypical detective habits. He stood, looking Detective Martin Jackson directly in the eye, his gaze unwavering. His intensity was palpable, a silent warning. His controlled fury was evident enough for Caleb to know Jordan was once again on the verge of losing control, a dangerous precipice he often found himself teetering upon.

"Listen here freak show..." Jackson snarled, his face contorted in anger, a vein throbbing in his temple. He took a step forward, his hand instinctively going to his sidearm, a gesture of escalating tension.

Caleb, ever the mediator, put his hand out, a calming gesture that stopped Detective Jackson from further provoking the volatile situation. "Any idea who we should be on the lookout for?" Caleb asked calmly, his voice a steadying force in the charged atmosphere, addressing Jordan directly, seeking a path forward.

Jordan held Detective Jackson's gaze for a long moment, a silent, almost telepathic understanding passing between them – a recognition of their shared profession, despite their clashing personalities. "The other night at the strip club, the guys

Brent was with... Chris and..." He snapped his fingers, a fleeting gesture of frustration as he searched for the name, the crucial missing piece of information. "Tyler. I don't know their last names. I'd start there. They seemed... off. Too interested in whatever Brent was doing, too eager to lead him astray."

He turned to leave, the urgency in his movements undeniable, and Caleb, accustomed to Jordan's impulsive nature, moved to follow. "Jordan, wait!" Caleb called out, a note of concern in his voice.

Jordan spun around in the hallway outside Brent's apartment, a flash of surprise crossing his features as he realized he still clutched Caleb's body cam. He handed it over as Caleb approached, a sheepish grin replacing the previous intensity. "Sorry," Jordan mumbled, his voice a little shaken, the adrenaline of the moment beginning to recede. "Got caught up in the moment. The pieces just... clicked."

"Jordan, you lost a friend tonight. Don't be so hard on yourself," Caleb said gently, his hand resting briefly on Jordan's shoulder, a gesture of comfort and understanding.

Jordan checked his phone, the screen illuminating his face in the dimly lit hallway. "Listen, I need to hurry..." His voice was tight, a new urgency replacing the earlier agitation.

"What's the rush?" Caleb asked, his brow furrowed in confusion, as Jordan tried to leave, stopping him with a hand on his arm, a firm but gentle restraint.

"Look, if I'm right, Mila's in danger..." Jordan said quietly, his gaze intense, a premonition of dread shadowing his features.

"The dancer? What does she have to do with this?" Caleb asked, his confusion deepening. The connection between Brent's death and a strip club dancer seemed tenuous at best.

Jordan gritted his teeth, forcing himself to steady his racing thoughts, to organize the chaotic information swirling in his mind. Caleb wasn't the enemy here; he was a trusted ally, a friend who deserved the truth. "It all goes back to her... and... I can't fail her or Courtney again..." The last words were almost a whisper, laden with a profound, unspoken grief.

He started to rush out, the unspoken specter of past failure driving him forward, but Caleb stopped him once more, his grip firm on Jordan's arm. "Jordan! Talk to me! You're not making any sense, and running off won't help anyone!"

Jordan attempted to bolt again, a desperate need to act overriding all logic, but Caleb's grip was firm, unyielding. "Jordan, either talk to me or I'm cuffing you... and you know I'll do it." The threat was real, a desperate measure to force Jordan to confide in him.

A coldness began to seep into Jordan's eyes, a hint of his alter ego surfacing, the ruthless bounty hunter simmering beneath the surface, threatening to break free. In the background, other police officers, aware of Jordan's past, of the darker side of his personality, instinctively reached for their weapons, a nervous tension rippling through the small group. They knew the stories, the rumors, the stark reality of what Jordan was capable of when pushed too far.

"You know damn well that won't be enough to stop me..." Jordan's voice was flat, devoid of emotion, a chilling testament to the power he possessed, the dangerous line he was willing to cross.

Caleb struggled to regain his composure, his face a mask of concern and frustration. He knew Jordan's threats weren't idle boasts. "Then speak, before this escalates for everyone involved. Give me something to work with, something I can act on, otherwise, I'm forced to contain you."

Jordan yanked his arm away, the sudden movement conveying his inner turmoil, drawing a shaky breath, as if steeling himself for a painful confession. "The night Courtney died... I was supposed to be there... I was so close..." he murmured, his voice barely a whisper, thick with regret and self-condemnation.

Jordan's consciousness fractured, the harsh reality of the present dissolving, replaced by a vivid, ethereal flashback. The world around him faded, replaced by the relentless grip of a past horror.

A thin man sprinted through a dense forest, the undergrowth snapping beneath his desperate strides, his head constantly swiveling over his shoulder, eyes wide with terror. Behind him, Jordan, clad in his full bounty hunter gear, pursued relentlessly, a dark silhouette against the dappled moonlight. His movements were fluid, precise, honed by countless chases. Jordan's focus was absolute, his gaze locked onto his mark with an almost supernatural intensity, an unwavering dedication to his quarry. His phone chimed faintly, a distant, ignored ring that echoed in the back of his mind, a harbinger of doom he refused to acknowledge, as he pressed on, unable to lose his quarry, unwilling to deviate from his mission.

The thin man, with a final, desperate burst of speed, vanished into the shadows, a fleeting specter swallowed by the darkness of the forest, leaving Jordan alone in a frustrated rage, his chest heaving with exertion. He paused, gasping for air, the bitter taste of failure coating his tongue, before pulling out his phone. The screen flickered, revealing a missed call from Courtney. A cold dread seeped into him, chilling him to the bone. He dialed his voicemail, the automated voice a prelude to the horror he was about to face, a detached, mechanical voice ushering in a lifetime of regret.

"Jordan! Jordan! Someone's in the house! Please get here!" Courtney's voice, raw with terror, with the primal fear of a trapped animal, tore through him, a scream that would forever echo in the chambers of his memory, shattering his world into a million irreparable pieces.

The hallway, dimly lit and smelling of antiseptic and stale air, became a crucible for Jordan. The spectral sprint of his flashback, a harrowing echo of Courtney's frantic cries, dissolved, leaving him anchored in a present fraught with tension. Caleb, his gaze piercing, saw not just his friend but the man utterly broken years ago, now attempting to brace himself for another fight against the relentless specters of his past and the escalating dangers of his present. The very air seemed heavy, thick with the unspoken weight of shared history and the profound silence of unspeakable loss. It was a silence broken only by the grim determination etched onto Jordan's face – the resolve of a man who refused to fail again, especially now.

"Jordan... I... I didn't know that," Caleb finally stammered, the words catching, thick with a mix of shock and dawning understanding. He had known Jordan's past was dark, but the raw intensity of what he'd just witnessed, the glimpse into that forgotten trauma, was far more profound than he had ever imagined.

Jordan sighed, a sound heavy with resignation and the weariness of untold burdens. "I haven't even told Angela," he

confessed, his voice barely above a whisper. "But I hope this revelation makes it clearer why I need you to let me back in... why I *have* to be involved now."

Caleb's shock deepened. "Jordan... you've come so far... you've worked so hard to put that behind you."

"I know," Jordan interrupted, his voice edged with a new, sharp bitterness that cut through the lingering echoes of his past. "But right now, some asshole isn't giving me much choice. They're forcing my hand, pushing me back into a corner I swore I'd never revisit."

Caleb turned, his gaze sweeping over the chaotic crime scene, a tableau of broken glass and spilled secrets, before settling back on Jordan. He pinched the bridge of his nose, a familiar ache of impending regret and overwhelming responsibility settling in. He understood the desperation in Jordan's eyes, the almost manic energy of a man pushed to his absolute limit.

"Alright," Caleb sighed, his voice thick with a profound resignation that hinted at the heavy cost of this concession. "Just please do me a favor before you do anything drastic. Before you unleash the man I just saw in that flashback."

"Name it..." Jordan replied, his expression unreadable, a mask of controlled intensity. His eyes, however, betrayed a simmering desperation, a dangerous edge.

"Take a walk, call Angela," Caleb urged, his voice steady, attempting to anchor Jordan to the present, to the people who still cared. "Come at this with a clear head. And, if at the slightest hint you think there's going to be trouble, if you feel yourself slipping, call before you lose yourself completely. Call before you cross that line again."

Jordan considered this, a silent battle raging behind his eyes. The suggestion was logical, rational, but the urge to act, to confront, was a powerful, almost primal force within him. Finally, he nodded slowly. "Only if you return the favor..."

"You know I'm here for you, brother..." Caleb said, his voice imbued with a quiet, unwavering promise, a bond forged in shared pasts and unspoken understanding. He knew the depths of Jordan's pain, and he would stand by him, no matter the cost.

"After seeing Mila..." Jordan began, his voice faltering, words catching in his throat, choked by an unspoken terror. The image of her, innocent and vulnerable, mingled with the horrific vision of his past self, twisting his gut. "I'm trying my best to separate her from Courtney, to keep those two lives distinct in my mind, but after seeing myself that night... after seeing what I became... I can't risk Mila seeing that again. I can't risk her seeing *me* like that."

"J... what are you saying?" Caleb asked, a knot of icy worry tightening in his stomach, a terrible premonition settling over him. He had seen Jordan at his darkest, but this... this was a new, terrifying plea.

Jordan's gaze, though haunted, was unwavering, fixed on Caleb with a grim, almost desperate resolve. "I'm saying, that if it looks like I might cross that line, if I become that monster again, I may need you to kill me..."

Caleb stared, dumbfounded, the words echoing in the sterile hallway, a chilling pronouncement. "Jordan... you can't ask me to..." His voice trailed off, the implication too horrific to articulate.

"I know..." Jordan interrupted, his voice a raw whisper, filled with a terrible certainty. "But... just in case. Just in case I lose myself completely, just in case I become a danger to the very people I'm trying to protect."

"You're a good dude, Jordan, you always have been," Caleb finally managed, his voice thick with emotion, a mix of profound sadness and unwavering loyalty. He swallowed hard, the weight of Jordan's request settling heavily on his shoulders. "I'll do what I can to stop you if it comes to it... I'll be there, I promise."

Jordan nodded, a silent acknowledgment of the terrifying pact they had just forged. "Thank you..."

He turned, a slight, almost imperceptible limp in his stride slowing his progress as he began to walk away from Caleb, the hallway stretching out before him like a shadowed tunnel.

"That leg still bothering you after the crash?" Caleb called out, his voice cautious, a thread of concern weaving through the lingering tension.

Jordan nodded again, his gaze fixed on some unseen point in the distance, not daring to look back at Caleb. "Stress seems to bring it back. The closer I get to the truth, the stronger these... urges become. It's safe to say I got too close to finding out what happened to Courtney. If I'm right about what's going on," he added, his voice dropping, taking on a conspiratorial, urgent tone that made the hairs on Caleb's arms stand on end, "be careful, Caleb. Someone here can't be trusted. Someone very close." The words hung in the air, a final, chilling warning, a phantom whisper of danger before Jordan disappeared into the dimness of the alley, leaving Caleb alone with the ghosts of the past and the unsettling premonition of a dangerously uncertain future. The city lights, usually a comforting glow, now seemed to mock him, highlighting the shadows that danced on the periphery of his vision.

He pulled up his left pant leg, revealing a jagged, angry scar—the enduring mark of the one attempt on his life that had truly left its indelible impact. The crash had been brutal, a twisted metal nightmare, and a bent part of his old car's frame

had embedded itself into the front of his ankle, cutting deep into the flesh, severing nerves and tendons. Caleb watched, a knot forming in his stomach, as his friend subtly stretched the muscles in his left leg, trying to alleviate the chronic pain that flared with every step.

A cold dread, a sickening premonition, blossomed in Caleb's chest as he realized Jordan might not just be walking into a difficult situation, but a full-blown war, a conflict he was ill-equipped to fight alone.

The sterile silence of Dr. Angela Martin's office was punctuated only by the soft, rhythmic click of her mouse, the cool, blue glow of the monitor her sole companion in the late-night hours. Client paperwork, a never-ending tide, threatened to engulf her, each file a life story, a challenge, a testament to her dedication. Then, her phone chimed, a surprising intrusion, cutting through the quiet hum of her office. Jordan. A genuine, unguarded smile touched her lips; she only knew of his date with Mila, a sweet, hopeful detail she'd encouraged, a step towards a semblance of normalcy.

"This is Dr. Angela Martin, speaking..." Her voice was professionally crisp, each syllable carefully modulated, a habit she'd honed over years of navigating the delicate balance of empathy and professional distance.

Jordan's reply was barely a whisper, a stark contrast to his usual vibrant tone. "Hey, Angela. It's Jordan Lambert."

Her smile widened, a fleeting moment of warmth in the cool office. "Oh Jordan! Hi! How was the date?"

A beat of silence stretched, thick and heavy, Jordan's voice still a faint echo from the receiver, a mere ghost of its usual strength. "It... it was amazing. Mila is... she's incredible. But something happened..." The words were laced with a quiet, raw emotion, a fragility that pricked at Angela's carefully constructed professional composure, sending a ripple of unease through her.

"Jordan, please don't tell me you lost control again," she urged, a worried tremor in her own voice, a fear she'd tried to suppress for so long, bubbling to the surface. His past was a volatile thing, always threatening to erupt.

"Angela, we had to cut things short because Paisley was in a drive-by shooting..." His voice was flat, devoid of emotion, a stark contrast to the barely contained panic Angela felt.

Angela's breath caught in her throat, a sharp, involuntary gasp. "Oh my god, is she okay?" The image of Paisley, so young and vulnerable, flashed in her mind.

"She is," Jordan's tone was stoic, flat, but Angela knew him too well. "Her car was hit but it was mostly cosmetic damage."

But Angela knew him too well, could practically see the unspoken words hanging in the air, a dark shadow over his voice, a heavier burden than mere property damage. "Jordan, what have you gotten yourself into now? What aren't you telling me?"

"I'm still trying to figure that out, but, it may require me to fully lose control... to become the person I fought so hard not to be." The admission hung in the air, a chilling premonition.

Her voice hardened, a professional barrier she hadn't meant to erect, a defense mechanism against the wave of dread washing over her. "Jordan... no... You know what happens when you go down that path. You swore you'd never go back."

"Angela, Brent's been murdered and someone staged the scene. I think the other two he came with to the club are involved." The words tumbled out, each one a stone dropping into a still pond, sending widening, ominous ripples through Angela's fragile peace. "When I went to check on Paisley, Mom just started coming at me... accusing me."

Angela listened, a growing sense of dread tightening in her chest, a cold knot forming in her stomach. His mother, always a chaotic element, was now a dangerous variable.

"She said she was leaving town to avoid me getting her or Paisley killed... she claimed I got Courtney killed. I came close to killing her if Caleb hadn't caught me in time. It was a close

call, Angela, too close." He paused, a ragged breath rattling through the phone. "But it's not just that. The owner of the nightclub was also killed, found in a construction site. Someone was stalking Mila and I when we went out to dinner. Possibly longer, Angela, I have a feeling this has been building for a while."

Angela's voice was on edge now, the sharp whisper of professional concern turning to genuine, raw fear for her patient, for her friend. "Jordan, you swore off this life. You promised me you'd never return to that darkness. If you get involved, especially with all the work you have done and how far you've come... How do you know jumping into the fire like this won't erase everything you've accomplished? All those years of therapy, all those breakthroughs, gone in an instant?"

"I don't know," Jordan admitted, a weariness settling in his voice that Angela hadn't heard before. It was a profound exhaustion, not just of the body, but of the soul, speaking of countless battles fought and an untold number yet to come. "I was just at a crime scene with Caleb, and I'm going to tell you what I told him. I don't know if I can fully be who I was, Angela, if I can ever truly escape the shadows of my past. But I might have no choice. This might be the only way to protect the people I care about." The line went silent, the oppressive quiet amplifying the terrifying implications of his words. Each syllable he'd uttered seemed to echo in the stillness, painting a grim picture that Angela's professional mind struggled to comprehend, let alone accept.

Angela's heart sank, a heavy stone in her chest, dragging her down into a pit of dread. There was nothing to say, no therapeutic technique, no professional advice that could breach the chasm of what he was implying. His words were a finality, a curtain falling on an act she hadn't realized was a play. Jordan's voice, which had been barely audible, a faint whisper against the static, now grew clearer, losing its muffled quality, as if he had moved closer to the receiver, or perhaps, closer to a truth he was finally ready to face.

"Dr. Martin," the stillness in his voice was chilling, a calm before a storm, a quiet before the thunder. "I just want to say that I appreciated your time. Especially recently, I wouldn't have been able to get this far. It's just unfortunate that it had to come apart like this. So for what it's worth... thank you. I'd stay on longer but... it's getting late and tonight might not see the light." The brutal honesty, devoid of any attempt at softening the blow, was perhaps the most unsettling aspect of his farewell.

A tear traced a burning path down Angela's cheek, a solitary betrayal of the professional composure she always maintained. Her professional background, every ounce of her training, every lecture, every case study, understood the brutal truth of his message. This was a goodbye. Not a temporary pause, not a hiatus, but an irrevocable severance.

"I understand, Jordan. It's been my pleasure. Just, please, keep fighting. If anyone can pull through this, it's you." Her voice broke on the last word, splintering into a million pieces, mirroring the shattering of her carefully constructed facade.

The click of the phone hanging up echoed in the sudden, vast silence of her office. The sound was a permission slip, a release, a signal for the dam to break. Her professional mask, so meticulously maintained, so carefully placed over years of dedication, shattered into a thousand fragments, revealing the raw, aching vulnerability beneath.

She collapsed into her chair, the padded leather offering no comfort against the crushing weight of her fear. Tears streamed freely now, hot and unending, blurring the edges of her sophisticated office, transforming it into a watery, indistinguishable mess. It was obvious, in the raw grief etched on her face, in the uncontrolled tremor of her hands, that she had developed a profound care and concern for Jordan's well-being, a bond that transcended the professional boundaries she had always prided herself on upholding.

"He's not gonna make it..." The words were a choked whisper, ripped from the depths of her soul, lost in the quiet of her office, swallowed by the rising tide of her fear, a fear so potent it felt like a physical entity pressing down on her.

At Carlos' safehouse, miles away from Angela's quiet office, a different kind of silence hung in the oppressive humid-

ity of the night. It was the silence of anticipation, of illicit activity, broken only by the grunts and heavy breathing of men at work. The putrid scent of copper, thick and metallic, hung heavy in the air, a visceral reminder of the gruesome cargo being transferred.

It clung to every surface, seeped into the very fabric of the dilapidated building, an undeniable testament to the violence that had preceded this moment. Two formidable figures, their silhouettes distorted by the scant, sickly yellow light filtering from the single grimy window of the safe house, strained as they wrestled large, cerulean barrels, their contents a terrifying mystery, into the rear of a nondescript cargo van.

One of the men, a gaunt, sickly figure whose constitution clearly wasn't suited for such endeavors, emitted a guttural, wet cough that rattled in his chest. "God, this shit stinks to high heaven," he rasped, recoiling slightly from the noxious fumes that emanated from the barrels. His face was a pale mask of revulsion, his eyes watering from the acrid stench.

The other gangster, a burly brute with a perpetually scowling face, a roadmap of past fights etched into his features, roughly nudged his partner with a thick forearm. "Quit your whining and hurry up! You want Carlos to carve us up next, too?" His voice was a low growl, laced with a palpable fear that seemed to emanate not just from him, but from the very walls of the building, a constant, underlying hum of dread.

As if on cue, the front door of the safe house exploded inward, splintering wood and sending dust motes dancing in the meager light. Standing framed in the doorway, a hulking, menacing figure silhouetted against the urban glow, was Carlos Delgado. His eyes, burning with an intense, predatory gleam, swept over the scene, missing nothing. "Hurry up and get that shit delivered to the buyer! We're gonna need that van later tonight!" His voice, a thunderous roar, echoed through the damp night air, leaving no room for argument, no space for hesitation. It was a command, absolute and terrifying.

The two goons flinched, their faces contorting in a mixture of terror and urgency. They scrambled to secure the last barrel, the clatter of metal on metal a jarring symphony in the quiet night, a desperate percussion accompanying their frantic movements. With a resounding clang, they slammed the van doors shut, their movements frantic and uncoordinated, driven by the primal urge for survival.

They then scrambled into the driver's and passenger's seats, the engine roaring to life with a jolt, a sudden burst of mechanical power disturbing the stillness. The van peeled away from the curb, tires screeching in protest against the asphalt, leaving behind angry black marks. The sound faded into the urban sprawl, a receding echo in the night, leaving behind only the lingering stench of copper and the heavy silence of a clandestine operation concluded, its dark secrets swallowed by the anonymity of the city.

Later that night, the city lights a distant hum, a soft, ethereal glow against the dark canvas of the sky, Mila lay restlessly in her apartment. The soft, inviting glow of her bedside lamp cast long shadows across the room, dancing with the barely perceptible movement of the air.

An open book, its pages undisturbed, lay beside her, a forgotten artifact of a routine that felt impossibly distant, a relic from a time when normalcy was still a concept she understood. The faint scent of vanilla and old paper, usually a comforting aroma, now only served as a stark reminder of the peaceful evenings she once took for granted. Dressed in luxurious white satin pajamas, a fabric that felt absurdly soft against her skin given the harshness of the night, Mila was a stark contrast to the grim reality she inhabited. Her usual nightly ritual of unwinding with a chapter or two of a good book had been brutally usurped by a gnawing, unrelenting worry for Jordan, a worry that coiled in her stomach like a venomous snake, its fangs constantly pricking at her insides. Her gaze, a beacon of silent desperation, drifted ceaselessly to her phone, its dark screen a reflection of her own shadowed anxiety. A silent prayer echoed in the quiet of her apartment, a desperate plea to the universe, willing it to burst into life, to shatter the suffocating silence that pressed in on her from all sides. Every tick of the antique grandfather clock in the living room seemed to amplify the crushing weight of her fear.

And then, as if by some divine intervention, a miracle. The screen flickered, then flared to life, a sudden, blinding light

in the encroaching darkness. Jordan's smiling face, already her beloved background, vibrated with the urgency of an incoming call, his eyes sparkling with a familiar warmth that momentarily eased the chill in her heart.

Mila practically lunged for the device, her fingers fumbling with the touchscreen, answering before the first ring had even fully resonated through the room, the sound a jarring disruption to the silence. "Jordan?" she breathed, the single word a fragile whisper, her throat tight with a surge of anxiety that threatened to choke her, making it almost impossible to speak.

His voice, a familiar balm to her frayed nerves, a melodic comfort she hadn't realized how much she'd missed, came through the receiver, strong and clear despite the distance. "Hey, how are you holding up?" The question, though simple, was laden with concern, a testament to their deep connection, to the unspoken understanding that had always existed between them.

A weak, tremulous smile touched Mila's lips, a fleeting moment of relief amidst the turmoil, a brief flicker of light in the darkness. "I'm okay. I just... was really worried about you." The admission was raw, honest, a testament to the depth of her fear, a vulnerability she rarely showed.

"I appreciate it, truly." The line went ominously silent, punctuated only by faint, muffled sobs that, though distant,

sent a chilling jolt through Mila's heart, a premonition of impending tragedy. The sound was almost imperceptible, yet it screamed volumes, a silent alarm ringing in her ears.

"What is wrong, Jordan?" she urged, her voice laced with growing apprehension, her heart beginning to pound a frantic rhythm against her ribs, a drumbeat of dread.

A heavy, world-weary sigh echoed through the phone, the sound carrying the weight of unspeakable grief. "Brent's dead."

Mila's eyes widened in disbelief, her breath catching in her throat, a gasp stifled by the sudden shock. The world seemed to tilt on its axis, the air growing heavy around her. "Your friend? What happened to him?" The words were barely a whisper, a desperate plea for understanding, her mind struggling to grasp the enormity of what she was hearing.

"He was murdered. Someone tried to make it look like a drug overdose... but it wasn't." His voice, though controlled, carried an undertone of barely contained rage and grief, a raw edge that sent shivers down Mila's spine. She could hear the barely suppressed fury in his tone, a dangerous undercurrent.

"Jordan, I don't know what to say," she stammered, her mind reeling, struggling to process the devastating news. "How is your sister?" A sudden thought of his family pierced through her shock, a sudden shift in her focus.

Another sigh, heavier this time, laden with an almost unbearable weight of responsibility. "She's okay. Her car took most of the damage in the... incident. Our mother is taking her out of town for a few days to get her away from all of this."

Mila exhaled, a breath of profound relief escaping her lips, a small victory in a sea of despair. But a deep, unsettling unease still settled over her, a premonition of unseen dangers lurking just beyond the horizon, a dark cloud gathering in her mind. "Is something going to happen?" she asked, her voice tinged with a fresh wave of fear, a new anxiety beginning to blossom.

"I'm not sure, and I don't want you to be afraid. But, it's not looking good. Please be careful, okay?" His voice softened, a tender plea disguised as a warning, a desperate hope that she would heed his words.

Her gaze, a flicker of determined resolve, drifted to the sleek, black stun gun charging silently on her bedside table, a silent guardian in the growing darkness, a small but potent symbol of her readiness to face whatever came. "I will. As long as you do the same." Her voice was firm, a testament to her unspoken promise, a silent vow to protect herself and, by extension, him.

"I want to apologize again for all of this," Jordan's voice softened further, a wistful quality entering his tone, a touch

of regret. "I really wish we could've just stayed by the river, let ourselves get lost in the stars, in that moment of perfect peace."

"It's okay, Jordan," Mila whispered, her voice thick with raw emotion, tears welling in her eyes but refusing to fall, a fierce refusal to break down. "As long as we come together, my Sunshine, we will have those precious nights, wrapped in each other's presence, until the last stars fade for a new day."

His voice dropped, a loving murmur only she could hear, a tender secret shared between them, a whispered promise carried across the phone lines. "And with every new day, I hope to see you in the night, my sweetest Moonlight."

"Be safe," Mila replied, her voice barely audible, a fragile thread connecting them across the distance, a plea and a promise rolled into one.

She hung up, the tears she'd held back with such unwavering resolve finally spilling over, hot and salty, tracing paths down her cheeks, a torrent of release. After a moment, she composed herself, taking a deep, fortifying breath. Her shoulders straightened, a newfound strength settling in her posture, her eyes sweeping the room with a newfound determination, already planning, meticulously, for what might come next, for the storm that was undoubtedly brewing on the horizon, a storm she was determined to weather.

The sudden slam of the front door vibrated through Jordan's apartment, a jarring disruption to the oppressive silence that had settled in his absence. He'd barely kicked off his shoes before he was tearing through his closet, a cascade of clothes tumbling to the floor, each discarded item a testament to his frantic search. The air filled with the scent of cedar and stale fabric as shirts, jeans, and sweaters piled up around him. Deep within the chaotic jumble, behind a forgotten stack of winter coats, his fingers brushed against cold metal. He unearthed it – an old, dented safe, its surface cool and unyielding beneath his touch, scarred with the marks of time. With a grunt of effort, he pulled it from its hiding place, the sheer weight of it a stark reminder of its contents, of the secrets it held.

He carried the safe, almost reverently, into the sterile confines of his kitchen. The harsh fluorescent light above, usually so mundane, now cast long, dancing shadows on the worn countertops, transforming the familiar space into something foreboding. The metallic clatter of the safe hitting the tiled floor echoed ominously, a jarring punctuation in the otherwise silent room. Each reverberation amplified the tension that coiled in the air, a sound that seemed to boom, disproportionately loud, in the oppressive stillness. He paused, his gaze fixed on the intricate dial of the safe, his mind a silent rehearsal of the complex sequence of numbers. He visualized each turn, each click, before his fingers, surprisingly steady despite the turmoil within, began to punch in the code. The distinct clicking sounds of the tumblers provided a slow, de-

liberate rhythm, a metronome counting down to an unknown future in the quiet space.

Just then, a soft thud announced the unheralded arrival of his cat, a sleek, shadowy form that landed with uncanny grace on the counter beside him. Her emerald eyes, wide and luminous with an almost human concern, fixed on his unusual flurry of activity, clearly seeking his attention, a silent plea for reassurance. "Hey, girl," Jordan sighed, the tautness in his shoulders easing ever so slightly at her comforting presence. He scooped her up, holding her close, her soft fur a comforting presence against his cheek, a small anchor in his swirling anxieties. He scratched gently under her chin, feeling the vibrations of her nascent purr. His gaze drifted to her food and water bowls, noting with a quiet, almost grim satisfaction that they were plentiful enough to last a couple of weeks at most. "Looks like you'll be okay for a bit," he murmured, his voice a low rumble against her purring form, before gently setting her back down. A wave of sorrow, sharp and unexpected, washed over him.

Leaving the safe momentarily, a monument to the dangerous path he was about to tread, he moved towards the living room, a different kind of preparation now occupying his thoughts. He found the television remote, its cool plastic a familiar comfort in his hand, a small piece of normalcy. He clicked on the TV, setting it to a music channel, any sound to fill the oppressive silence. The soft, rhythmic beats of the background noise began to fill the apartment, a welcome dis-

traction from the unsettling quiet that had been pressing in on him. His cat, ever present, a loyal shadow, rubbed herself insistently against his legs, her persistent affection a tender anchor in his approaching storm.

"Someone will come for you if I can't..." Jordan knelt, his voice thick with a raw mixture of sorrow and grim resolve, his hand stroking her soft fur, committing the feeling to memory. "Please be good. I love you..." The unspoken words hung heavy in the air between them, a silent promise, a silent dread: *I might not be coming back.*

He rose, the weight of his unspoken goodbye a crushing burden in his chest, and walked back to the kitchen. He stood before the safe, a silent sentinel before the threshold of his past, a portal to the man he was forced to become. With a decisive click, he pulled open the door. Inside, nestled atop a stack of documents, lay an unloaded, holstered pistol. Its dark, cold gleam seemed to beckon him, a silent invitation to the dangerous path he was about to embark upon. He pulled out the weapon, its familiar weight settling in his hand, a weight he knew intimately. He removed it from its holster, inspecting it briefly with an almost practiced ease, his fingers moving with a chilling efficiency.

Reaching back into the safe, his fingers, guided by instinct, found a loaded magazine. He checked the number of bullets, each one a grim tally for the grim task ahead. "Fifteen," he muttered to himself, the word a stark pronouncement of the

limited resources at his disposal, each one precious, each one a potential life or death. "Better make them count." He shoved the magazine into the gun with a sharp, resonant click, the sound echoing in the quiet kitchen, a final, deliberate punctuation mark. Then, with a practiced motion, he set the weapon aside, his attention turning to the stack of papers – evidence and investigation journals, meticulously compiled during his relentless, all-consuming hunt for Courtney's killer.

Jordan sorted through the documents, each page a painful reminder, a fresh wound of his relentless pursuit. Finally, his fingers, almost trembling with anticipation, located it: a list of suspects he'd painstakingly compiled, each name a ghost from his past, a potential key to his future. Each name was accompanied by terse, often damning notes pertaining to their connections and potential roles in the tragedy that had consumed his life. The names read like a rogues' gallery, a collection of shadows and monsters: Hector Delgado, a strip club owner, a figure shrouded in the murky world of vice, his connections likely as seedy as his business; Armando Delgado, Hector's imprisoned brother, a man whose ties to the underworld ran deep, a festering wound in the city's underbelly; Bailey Eastman, a name tagged with the damning potential of being a "dirty cop," a betrayal of public trust that gnawed at his soul; "Flaya," a punk, his motivations and connections still largely unknown, a wild card in this deadly game; Daren Saint, dismissed with the contemptuous label of "alcoholic moron," a potentially dangerous loose cannon, unpredictable and volatile; Tyler Laverty, a dealer, his network of illicit con-

nections vast and insidious, a spiderweb of depravity; Chris Mule, a "perverted stalker," his depravity a chilling echo of the evil Jordan sought to eradicate, a monster in human form; and Martin Jackson, another name shadowed by the question mark of being a "dirty cop?" The final name on the list, starkly alone and accompanied only by a large, bold question mark, was Carlos Delgado, a name that ignited a flicker of both hope and dread within him, the last, desperate thread to pull.

Jordan set the documents down, the sheer weight of the information pressing down on him, a crushing burden on his already weary soul. He slammed his hands onto the counter, the sharp impact a release of pent-up frustration, a desperate attempt to ground himself. Then, with a renewed, almost desperate sense of purpose, he grabbed his pistol and holster, the instruments of his coming transformation. He returned to his bedroom, his movements swift and decisive, a man on a mission. He ripped open his closet, digging through the layers of his ordinary life, shedding the skin of who he was until his hand closed around the familiar, rough fabric of his old Kevlar vest. He set it aside, digging deeper, unearthing stab-resistant Kevlar sleeves and a black beanie, each item a piece of the armor he was about to don.

The costume of El Grande Cabron, his vigilante alter ego, was once again within reach, beckoning him back to the darkness. But the worried look on Jordan's face broadcasted the one thought on his mind without a word, a question etched deep within his eyes: *Can he truly let himself be that man*

again? He pondered the question, worry etched across his features, as he dug further into the closet, searching for anything else that might aid his hunt, each item a piece of the terrifying puzzle he was about to become.

7

Red Stained Night

As Jordan armed himself for an unseen war, a storm of unease brewing within him, Caleb was led outside Brent's apartment building. His gaze, almost instinctively, was drawn to the fresh set of tire marks etched deeply into the grimy, oil-stained asphalt of the alleyway. The scent of burnt rubber still lingered faintly in the cool morning air, a silent, stark declaration of a hurried, almost frantic departure. Each subtle nuance of the scene painted a picture of urgency, a desperate rush against time.

Under the struggling moonlight, which cast long, distorted shadows, Detective Jackson and Caleb stood over the undeniable acceleration marks. They were a stark, silent testament to a hasty departure, perhaps even Brent's final moments. The air between them was thick with unspoken questions, with the ominous, suffocating weight of the unknown, each man lost in his own troubled thoughts.

"So, Winston," Jackson began, his voice a low, deceptively passive rumble that sent an involuntary shiver down Caleb's spine, prickling the hairs on his arms. "While the lab rats take their sweet time getting here, I've got a question for you." He paused, allowing the silence to stretch, to amplify the tension. His sharp eyes meticulously studied Caleb, dissecting him with an unnerving intensity, as if trying to decipher a complex, deeply personal code hidden within his very being. "What's your relationship with that Lambert guy? You two seem like you've known each other a long time." A faint, almost imperceptible smirk played on Jackson's lips, a subtle flicker of amusement at Caleb's discomfort, a hint of something deeper, more calculating.

Caleb, momentarily confused by the sudden, abrupt shift in topic from the grim scene before them to a seemingly unrelated personal inquiry, glanced at Jackson before dismissing the fleeting thought as unimportant in the grand scheme of things. "We have. We met in school, maybe twelve or thirteen?" He recalled a time of innocent friendships, of shared laughter and youthful dreams, a stark, painful contrast to the grim, unfolding reality surrounding him, a reality that seemed to be closing in like a tightening noose.

"Oh, so you two are best school buddies, then?" Jackson pressed, his voice laced with a hint of something unreadable, something almost menacing, lurking just beneath the surface of his tone. He seemed to relish in Caleb's growing discomfort, drawing it out like a sadistic game.

"Not exactly. We kind of drifted back and forth over the years. Nothing happened, just...life." Caleb's voice trailed off, a sense of foreboding settling over him, a cold premonition of something terrible yet to come.

Jackson's eyes narrowed slightly, like a predator spotting its prey, ready to strike. "You two seem to trust each other pretty heavily." His gaze lingered on Caleb, a subtle challenge in his eyes, a silent dare for Caleb to refute his observation.

Confusion deepened on Caleb's face, a ripple of profound unease spreading through him, chilling him to the bone. "Yeah." He hesitated, a distant, bittersweet memory surfacing from the depths of his past. "When we were kids, Jordan was the main one who checked in with me after cancer took my grandmother. Apparently, our teacher told everyone to back off me, but he didn't listen. I didn't know until a couple of years later that he also had a grandparent with the same kind of cancer. Guess he saw in me the heartache that was waiting for him." A pang of bittersweet nostalgia hit Caleb, a reminder of a bond forged in shared grief, a connection that had transcended the simple boundaries of friendship.

Detective Jackson merely nodded, his gaze flicking to his watch, a subtle gesture that betrayed an underlying impatience, a desire to move on to the true purpose of his interrogation.

"Why do you ask?" Caleb finally inquired, his voice laced with a growing suspicion, a knot of dread tightening in his stomach.

"Just curious," Jackson replied, a nonchalant shrug in his voice, though his eyes held a glint of something far from casual, something calculating and dangerous. "The way you two were talking earlier made it look like he was the best man at your wedding." A faint, knowing smile touched his lips, a chilling hint of the true nature of his interest.

Caleb straightened, his confusion morphing into something more akin to profound unease, a cold dread washing over him as he faced the detective. "Well, he also saved my wife before we got married, after a suicide attempt. He even gave her blood." The words hung in the air, weighty with revelation, heavy with a significance that seemed to shift the very atmosphere around them.

Detective Jackson's stance stiffened perceptibly, his hand practically hovering over his holstered pistol, a stark, alarming shift from his earlier relaxed demeanor. A flicker of something dark, something predatory, crossed his face, transforming his features into a mask of chilling intent. "Too bad he's not here to save you." His voice was low, laced with a chilling finality, a pronouncement of doom.

The realization slammed into Caleb, a gut-wrenching blow that stole his breath, leaving him gasping for air. The

pieces clicked into place with sickening clarity, forming a horrifying mosaic: Jordan's cryptic warning, his outright hostility towards Jackson, his desperate, urgent plea to escape. He knew. Jordan had known all along. Jackson was a dirty cop. The truth, when it hit, was a bitter, metallic taste in his mouth, the taste of betrayal and impending doom.

Behind Caleb, two ominous figures emerged from the inky shadows of the alley, effectively blocking the only exit, cutting off any hope of escape: Officer Bailey Eastman and her brother, Flaya. Both had guns drawn, their faces grim, their intentions chillingly clear. The air crackled with a palpable tension, a volatile silence, a terrifying prelude to the impending storm that was about to break.

"What the hell is going on?" Caleb's voice, usually steady and authoritative, cracked with a raw, desperate demand that clawed its way out of his throat, echoing off the cold, unforgiving brick walls of the alley. The narrow passage, typically a shortcut he'd used countless times, now felt like a suffocating trap. His mind, usually sharp and analytical, raced in a frantic, desperate attempt to comprehend the unfolding nightmare, to grasp at any thread of logic that could lead him out of this inescapable snare. The metallic tang of fear coated his tongue, and a cold dread began to coil in his gut.

"I'm sorry about this, Caleb," Bailey said, her voice a stark contrast to the chilling scene, laced with a genuine remorse that seemed to war with the cold, calculating glint in her

brother's eyes. Her gaze, usually so direct, flickered with an uncharacteristic uncertainty. "It wasn't supposed to go like this... This isn't how it was meant to be." Her words were a chilling confession, a lament whispered into the tense air, a whispered apology for the unforgivable act they were about to commit. The air crackled with a palpable tension, thick and suffocating.

"Like what?" Caleb's confusion, initially a dull ache, was now laced with a growing, suffocating dread that tightened its grip around his chest. He spun his head, his gaze darting frantically between Jackson, whose face remained impassive, and the armed siblings, a desperate attempt to piece together the fractured reality that had so suddenly shattered around him. Every instinct screamed at him to run, but his feet felt rooted to the grimy pavement.

Bailey sighed, the sound heavy with a profound resignation and regret that seemed to emanate from her very core. "We needed you to keep Jordan away, but you couldn't." Her words, delivered with a chilling finality, confirmed Caleb's deepest, most terrifying fears. The pieces of the puzzle clicked into place, forming a horrific picture. He had been a pawn, an unwitting accomplice in a sinister game, a puppet whose strings were now being cut. A wave of betrayal washed over him, colder than the night air.

"Yo! Let's kill these fools already!" Flaya shouted, his voice a harsh, impatient bark that ripped through the tense silence,

shattering it like glass. His eyes, glinting with a predatory hunger, revealed an eagerness for bloodshed that sent a shiver down Caleb's spine. The casual cruelty of the remark ignited a spark of defiance within Caleb.

It was a setup. The realization, stark and brutal, galvanized Caleb, shaking him from his stunned paralysis. His instincts, honed by years of training, took over with a primal urgency. He instinctively drew his firearm, a swift, brutal ballet of motion, muscle memory guiding his hand. It was a desperate act of self-preservation, a last-ditch effort against the overwhelming odds. A shot rang out, a deafening crack that reverberated in the confined space, assaulting his ears. Flaya crumpled, his life extinguished in an instant, dead before he even hit the ground, a chilling testament to Caleb's quick thinking.

Officer Eastman cried out, a gravely injured gasp that was more air than sound, her hand clutching her side, a dark stain rapidly blooming on her uniform. As Caleb instinctively dove for the meager cover of a overflowing dumpster, the world seemed to slow, every movement precise, every sound amplified to an unbearable degree. The acrid smell of gunpowder filled the air, mingling with the metallic scent of blood. Detective Jackson, his face a mask of cold, deliberate resolve, opened fire. A single, deliberate shot, chilling in its precision, rang out, striking Caleb in the head with a sickening thud. The impact sent a blinding flash of pain through his skull, and the world began to tilt.

Caleb's body cam, not fully secured to his uniform in the chaotic aftermath, broke free from its mount. It skittered across the grimy pavement, a silent, unblinking eye, coming to rest beneath a nearby dumpster. Its lens, now coated in grime and oil, continued to record, a silent, unblinking witness to the unfolding tragedy, capturing every horrific detail for an unseen future.

Detective Jackson advanced on Caleb, his face a grim mask of determination, intent on delivering the final, fatal blow, to ensure Caleb's silence. The alley was steeped in a chilling stillness, punctuated only by the ragged breaths of the injured. But then, in a final, superhuman surge of strength, Officer Eastman, her eyes blazing with a desperate need for justice, opened fire. Her shots were ragged, fueled by adrenaline and a dying defiance, but they found their mark. Jackson reeled, a look of shocked disbelief on his face, his plans unraveling in the face of an unexpected rebellion. He then collapsed, dead, his life abruptly ended.

Officer Eastman slumped to the ground, the life draining from her as her injuries finally claimed her. Her last breath was a whispered sigh, a final act of atonement for a world that had betrayed her. The alley, once filled with the cacophony of violence and desperate cries, settled into an eerie, suffocating silence, broken only by the distant, wailing crescendo of sirens, a belated arrival to a scene of profound loss and betrayal, a grim tableau of shattered lives. The air hung heavy with the scent of blood and extinguished hope.

As Jordan's humanity continued its slow, agonizing dissolution, melting into a stark, frigid void of pure calculation, Mila's fragile peace shattered once more, her world thrown into a sickeningly sharp focus. The unsettling call from her new love had already stretched her nerves taut, a low, ominous hum of anxiety vibrating beneath her skin—a chilling premonition of impending doom. But the sudden, violent jolt of someone attempting to force open her front door sent a pure, undiluted surge of adrenaline through her veins, a cold wave of terror that propelled her to her feet with a gasp. Her heart hammered against her ribs, a frantic, desperate drumbeat against the silence.

Her breath hitched, ragged and thin. Without a flicker of hesitation, her hand shot out, snatching her charged stun gun from the nightstand. Its cool, familiar weight settled into her trembling palm, a grim comfort in the face of the encroaching threat. Silently, she crept out of her bedroom, leaving it cloaked in absolute darkness—a strategic void. There would be no damsel in distress here, no pathetic, whimpering cries for rescue. Mila would show them precisely what a survivor looked like.

She crouched low, pressing herself against the cool, sturdy surface of a kitchen cabinet, a small, improvised arsenal of sharp knives and heavy pans within easy, desperate reach. From the narrow sliver of her hiding spot, she watched, her heart a frantic drum against her ribs, as three shadowy figures

stumbled clumsily into her living room. Their movements were hampered by the profound, disorienting blackness of the apartment. One, a hulking man she recognized instantly as Daren Saint, stepped carelessly into her direct line of sight.

"Where is this cunt?" Daren's voice, a harsh, guttural whisper, sliced through the oppressive quiet, thick with palpable menace.

Mila didn't hesitate. She fired the stun gun. The probes, propelled by a primal surge of vengeance and a desperate need for survival, found their mark with sickening precision in Daren's crotch. He screamed, a raw, primal sound of agony that tore through the apartment, as the electricity coursed through him, sending his massive frame collapsing to the floor in a twitching, pitiful heap. Mila dropped the now-useless weapon, its immediate purpose served, and snatched the nearest knife, the cold steel a sudden, lethal extension of her will. She charged, a phantom in the dark. As she moved relentlessly toward the bathroom entrance, a silent, deadly testament to her resolve, she plunged the blade deep into Daren's side.

Chris Mule and Tyler Laverty, the other two men, scrambled in panicked confusion, their movements frenzied and disoriented as they tried desperately to locate their attacker, guided only by Daren's pained, gurgling cries. Mila, now positioned strategically at the doorway to her bedroom, held up a small candle lighter and a can of hairspray. A decisive click, a sharp hiss, and then a terrifying burst of flame erupted, en-

gulfing Daren in an instant inferno. The hungry flames licked aggressively at the clothing of Chris and Tyler, momentarily blinding them with its shocking intensity.

Chris, shedding his burning shirt with frantic haste and a desperate, guttural yell, managed to tackle Mila with brute force, pinning her mercilessly to the floor. Tyler, seizing a heavy pan from the kitchen counter, brought it down hard and fast on Mila's face. The world exploded into a blinding flash of incandescent white, then darkness claimed her entirely, pulling her into an abyss of unconsciousness.

A stray elbow, a clumsy movement in the frenzied chaos, and a touch-activated lamp on an end table flickered to life, illuminating the horrific scene: Chris Mule, panting and disheveled, his eyes wide with a mixture of fear and adrenaline; Tyler Laverty, his face pale with panic; and the fatally unconscious Daren Saint, still smoldering, a grotesque monument to Mila's desperate stand.

"Moron!" Chris Mule gasped, exhaustion and a profound exasperation lacing his voice, a raw edge of creeping fear evident in every syllable. "Carlos will rip our balls off if she's hurt!"

"Fuck you, she was killing us!" Tyler Laverty retorted, his voice edged with hysterical panic, still reeling from the unexpected and brutal assault. "Fucking Daren smells like bacon in a hair salon!"

"Whatever, just help me carry her out of the fire escape..." Chris grumbled, his voice laced with a grudging resignation, already moving to hoist Mila's limp form.

Building alarms, a shrill, piercing symphony of impending discovery, began to wail, echoing through the confined space, a stark declaration of their compromised position.

"We're gonna get spotted..." Tyler began, his voice rising in alarm, glancing nervously towards the apartment door, the siren song of the alarms filling the air.

"You ever pay attention to your neighbors?" Chris snapped, frustration thick and palpable in his tone, his eyes darting to the fire escape. He knew exactly what he was doing; every escape route, every blind spot, every potential avenue of escape was meticulously mapped in his mind.

With a desperate, shared effort, Chris and Tyler dragged Mila's unconscious body from the apartment, navigating the narrow confines of the fire escape with a practiced urgency. Carlos's nondescript van was already waiting discreetly outside, its engine humming softly, a barely perceptible thrum of power, ready to make their swift, silent escape into the vast, indifferent expanse of the night.

Perhaps a part of them, deep within their criminal hearts, knew the terrible onslaught that would fall upon them if Jor-

dan realized they were the ones who had dared to touch, to take, his new love. As they ran back to Carlos' safehouse, melting into the shadows of the city, Jordan was already on the move, a force of nature unleashed, his path converging inevitably with theirs. The hunt had begun.

The roar of road construction equipment vibrated through the air, a discordant symphony accompanying Jordan's frantic rush from his truck. Clad in an intricate mosaic of tactical armor, his badge a gleaming beacon against his chest, he surveyed the decrepit office building that had served as Hector Delgado's operational hub. His hand, a practiced reflex, settled on the reassuring weight of his pistol as his gaze snagged on a door, slightly ajar, an unspoken invitation into the building's shadowy maw.

The interior was a chilling tableau of disarray. Hector's office, in particular, bore the stark hallmarks of a hasty, ill-conceived attempt at a cleanup. Spent bullet casings, like metallic confetti, littered the floor, their glinting surfaces mocking the pretense of order. Jagged chips in the walls, silent witnesses, chronicled a violent exchange, and the faint, poorly scrubbed bloodstains marring various surfaces whispered tales of desperation and brutality.

A primal urgency seized Jordan. He tore into Hector's desk, ripping open drawers with a frantic abandon, his movements fueled by a desperate need to unearth any clue, however

small, to Carlos's whereabouts. His eyes, sweeping across the chaotic expanse of the desk, snagged on the tablet Flaya had provided Hector. He snatched it up, his fingers flying across the screen, and with a surprising, almost unnerving ease, it unlocked. A photo message, chilling in its immediate appearance, materialized on the screen.

Jordan's breath hitched, caught in his throat like a trapped bird. It was Mila, her image a stark testament to her captivity, bound and gagged. A text message, ostensibly from Carlos Delgado, accompanied the horrifying image, its words a vile taunt: *Come get your girl Cabrón. She's got quite the fight in her, she's gonna be fun to play with...*

A guttural, primal roar tore from Jordan's throat, a sound born of pure, unadulterated fury. The tablet, a fragile symbol of his rage, shattered in his hands, its pieces scattering across the room like shrapnel as he flipped Hector's desk with a violent, resounding crash. But the insistent wail of passing police sirens and the monotonous drone of road equipment, a relentless backdrop to the chaos, pierced through his incandescent rage, a cold, sharp slap of reality. He forced himself to rein in his fury, to sift through the tempest of chaotic thoughts swirling in his mind, desperate to locate Carlos. Losing control now would render him utterly useless. Mila was in grave danger, every second ticking away, a precious commodity slipping through his fingers.

"Think, Jordan, think," he muttered, his voice raw with a desperate frustration that bordered on agony. "What the hell does Carlos want? Why go through all this?" His gaze flickered towards the window, the ceaseless construction noise filling the void, a constant reminder of the world outside his immediate, visceral anger. "It's gotta be a power play... show how easy it would be for him to tear everything apart. He'd want to take me on himself. Lil fucker watched too many gangster movies to actually know anything about real fighting." He slammed his fist against the desk, the impact jarring his bones. "But where's the fight? Where is Mila?"

The insistent clang of construction and the screech of worn car brakes outside, a cacophony of urban life, triggered a sudden, jarring realization—a flashback, vivid and unbidden.

His mind shifted, an ethereal glow bathing the living room of a suburban home, a distinct departure from the harsh reality of the present. Jordan sat at a table, meticulously cleaning his pistol, his movements precise and practiced, as Courtney entered through the front door, clad in workout clothes, her energy radiating a gentle weariness.

"Hey hun, how was class? Whooped anyone's ass today?" Jordan asked, his focus unwavering on his gun, the metallic glint catching the light.

Courtney walked over, her presence a comforting warmth. She placed a hand on his shoulder, a silent caress, and leaned

down to kiss him before heading towards the kitchen. "Not unless you count the mannequins as people," she said, her voice tinged with a soft exhaustion. She retrieved a bottled water from the fridge, pressing the cool plastic against her skin before taking a long, refreshing sip.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll get to knock somebody out one of these days," Jordan joked, a lightheartedness in his tone that seemed impossibly distant now.

Courtney giggled, a sound that echoed with a forgotten joy, rolling her eyes in playful exasperation. She pulled a chair next to him, her presence a comforting anchor. "I'd love to give those idiots working the roads a beating..."

"They're still working on it?" Jordan asked, a flicker of genuine curiosity in his voice.

"Oh yeah!" she nodded, her expression confirming the perpetual nature of the roadwork. "I had to go through this one neighborhood and, baby, there was this house that just didn't feel right."

Jordan stopped cleaning his gun, the metal clinking softly as he set it down, his full attention now on her, a sudden seriousness replacing his earlier jesting. "What do you mean?"

"There was this house I passed and it just felt evil," Courtney explained, a slight shiver running through her. "These

guys were outside, cleaning this red goo from a van. It honestly looked barricaded like a drug den, but with some high-end security. Then this other, really skinny guy came out and saw me pass by. He watched me, with this grin that just didn't look human!"

Jordan's eyes widened, a dawning comprehension slowly spreading across his face.

Courtney sighed, a deep, bone-weary exhalation that seemed to carry the weight of a premonition. "Jordan," she began, her voice a low murmur, thick with unspoken anxieties. "I know with the baby on the way, I've been saying that maybe we should figure out something safer, something more secure for us... But, honey, you need to watch out for that house. Something evil is there. I can feel it." Her words, though gentle, were laced with a profound unease that Jordan, in his rational, ordered world, had dismissed as the anxieties of impending parenthood.

Jarred back to the agonizing present by the grating roar of road construction, Jordan shouted, "Son of a bitch!" The sound was a visceral, physical jolt, tearing him violently from the suffocating grip of his memories. But the sudden intrusion of the outside world, while disruptive, offered no solace. The raw pain of his past still clung to him, a parasitic twin.

He stood in the dilapidated office building, the air thick with the dust of decay, a bitter tang of despair clinging to

every surface like a shroud. His hands were clasped behind his head, a futile attempt to contain the explosion of truth that was now consuming him. The horrifying realization crashed over him, a tidal wave of guilt and agony: Courtney, his vibrant, loving Courtney, had been led directly to her killer—and he, in his blind trust, his unwavering belief in the inherent good of people, had been the unwitting instrument of her demise. He sank to his knees, the floor cold and gritty beneath him, each gasp for breath a painful rasp in his throat as his head spun with the dizzying, nauseating weight of what he had done, or rather, what he had so catastrophically failed to do.

Pulling out his phone, his fingers trembling with a tremor that originated deep in his soul, he opened the therapy app. It was a lifeline he'd clung to since Courtney's death, a digital confessional to Dr. Martin, a man who had patiently listened to the unraveling of Jordan's sanity, a silent witness to his descent into grief and self-recrimination. This entry, however, felt different—not a plea for understanding, but a final, desperate cry into the void, a grim prelude to a plunge into an abyss from which there might be no return.

Mila's in danger, he typed, the words appearing on the screen, stark and raw, a ragged confession ripped from the depths of his soul. His niece, innocent and vulnerable, now a pawn in a game of unspeakable cruelty. *The same bastard who killed Courtney has her; and I have no choice but to go...*

He paused, his fingers hovering over the screen, the cursor blinking impatiently, a tiny, rhythmic pulse in the vast silence of the room. The unspoken words hung heavy in the air, a testament to the man he once was, a man defined by law and order, by a moral compass that had always pointed true, unwavering in its direction. *But I don't know if I can fully be the man I was.* The admission was a bitter pill, a surrender to the insidious darkness that threatened to engulf him, to remake him in its own image. *I do have a plan.* A flicker of grim resolve ignited within him then, a tiny spark in the overwhelming gloom, a defiant refusal to be extinguished completely.

The next words flowed with a grim, chilling determination, a meticulous blueprint for the chaos he was about to unleash. *It's going to be noisy, messy, chaotic.* His old life, so meticulously ordered and controlled, so carefully constructed, was about to be shattered beyond recognition. *Right now I don't see much other option.* The rules, the boundaries, the lines he'd always respected—they no longer applied. They were irrelevant, rendered meaningless by the enormity of his loss and the chilling reality of Mila's plight.

My suspicions about this whole ordeal may prove no other choice but to cross the one line I always avoided. He was speaking of the line between right and wrong, between justice and vengeance, a line he had sworn an unbreakable oath to uphold, a sacred boundary he had promised to never violate. But now, with Mila's life hanging in the balance, a fragile thread suspended over an unforgiving chasm, that line seemed

a meaningless, arbitrary construct, a luxury he could no longer afford, a moral nicety he was prepared to obliterate.

He sent the journal entry, the act a final, irrevocable commitment, a sealing of his fate. The digital message was a point of no return, a silent declaration of war against the shadows that had consumed his life. He bolted from the office, the door slamming shut behind him with a definitive punctuation mark on the life he was leaving behind. The echoes of his past self, the man of principle and restraint, the man who believed in the immutable power of the law, faded with the clang of the closing door. He was no longer that man. He was something new, something dangerous, something forged in the crucible of loss and driven by an insatiable, burning need for retribution.

8

Man at War

Mila's eyelids fluttered open, her head a pulsating drum solo of agony. The air, thick with the cloying scent of damp earth and the coppery tang of stale sweat, clawed at her throat, each breath a shallow, painful gasp. Disorientation, a heavy, suffocating cloak, clung to her as she attempted to shift, only to discover her limbs were rebels against her will, bound by the unforgiving bite of cold metal digging into her wrists and ankles. The chilling realization of her predicament sent a shiver of primal terror down her spine.

A looming shadow solidified into a figure above her, a man whose eyes gleamed with an unnerving, almost predatory intensity in the dim light. Carlos Delgado. He knelt there, a grotesque admirer, his gaze fixed on her with the possessive absorption of a collector admiring a rare butterfly, meticulously pinned and utterly helpless, destined for his macabre collection. A sickening wave of revulsion washed over Mila.

A white-hot rage, pure and potent, surged through Mila, chasing away the last vestiges of fear. Fear, she knew, was a weakness, a dangerous indulgence she couldn't afford in this grim scenario. Her fists, though useless against the unyielding chains that held her captive, clenched so tight her knuckles screamed in protest, stark white against her bruised skin. A defiant spark ignited in her eyes, a fierce, untamed fire that, to her horror, seemed to delight Carlos. It ignited a childlike glee that spread across his face, rendering his features oddly soft, terrifying in its utter incongruity.

"Oh, you're awake!" Carlos exclaimed, his voice bubbling with an almost manic excitement, a sound that grated on Mila's raw nerves. "This makes me so happy!" He didn't wait for a response, didn't seem to expect one, lost in his own twisted reverie. The basement, a claustrophobic maw of rough-hewn stone and a single, flickering bulb hanging precariously from a wire, seemed to hum with his twisted pleasure, amplifying the unsettling silence. He pulled out his phone, his thumb gliding across the screen with a practiced ease that made Mila's blood run cold. She watched, her heart hammering against her ribs like a trapped bird, the primal fight-or-flight instinct screaming within her, a desperate, unheard siren in the suffocating darkness.

"Oh, don't worry, baby!" Carlos purred, his voice laced with a sickening giddiness that made her stomach churn, threatening to bring up the bile that burned in her throat. "I want to save our fun for your new man. Besides, I'm... I'm ac-

tually a big fan." The words hung in the oppressive air, a poisonous miasma, chilling Mila to the bone. Who was he talking about? What "fun" was he planning? A tremor of genuine fear, cold and insidious, snaked through her, a stark contrast to the initial fury.

He turned the phone towards her, the screen a glaring accusation in the dim, flickering light. Mila's breath hitched, caught in her throat, a dry, ragged sound. Staring back at her was an image that ripped through her carefully constructed defenses – a snapshot from her seductive web page, an intimate moment she'd thought was private, secure, locked away from prying eyes and the world's harsh judgment. Her eyes widened in horror, the fierce rage that had sustained her giving way to a sickening wave of dread, a primal scream trapped within her chest, suffocated by the cold air. She strained against her chains, a desperate, futile struggle, every muscle screaming in protest as the cold metal bit deeper into her flesh, but the chains held firm, unyielding.

"Oh, cabrón," Carlos purred, his gaze lingering on the image on the screen, a possessive, leering triumph in his eyes, a glint of pure malice. "You sure have fine tastes..." He savored the words, drawing them out, his voice dripping with insinuation, intending to draw out her agony, to break her spirit with this profound violation of her privacy, her very being.

Before he could continue his twisted intimidation, a heavy thud echoed from above, followed by a muffled shout, then a

muffled roar, shaking the very foundations of the dilapidated structure. Someone was pounding on the secret door that led into the basement, a frantic, insistent rhythm that shattered the grotesque tableau, breaking the sinister spell Carlos had woven.

Carlos's head snapped up, his composure instantly shattered, the manic glee that had consumed him replaced by a flicker of pure panic in his eyes. He scrambled to his feet, hurrying up the creaking wooden stairs, each step a groan of protest from the ancient wood. With a grunt of effort, he forced open the door, leaving Mila bound in the suffocating darkness, the horrifying image of her stolen privacy seared into her mind, a burning brand of shame and fury.

The bass notes of heavy rock music vibrated through the very foundations of the safe house, a sinister lullaby barely managing to drown out Carlos Delgado's enraged shouts. "Yo, what the fuck is going on?!" His voice, usually a low growl, was now a guttural roar, laced with an unsettling mix of raw fury and palpable fear, echoing through the makeshift prison.

A burly man whose usual bravado was now replaced by wide-eyed panic, stumbled into the room. "Boss, Cabron's truck is outside playing the music, but there's no sign of him!"

Carlos, a man whose grip was famously iron, seized the goon's shirt, his knuckles white. "Then get fucking ready!

He's here!" The words hung in the air, heavy with a premonition of violence.

A wave of palpable panic surged through the room as goons, their faces etched with a desperate fear, scrambled for their guns and knives. The metallic clang of weapons being readied echoed through the tense silence. Two of them, their faces grim masks of apprehension, were dispatched outside to investigate the source of the unsettling music and the abandoned truck.

Outside, the night air was thick, not just with the impending chill, but with the pulsating rhythm of the hard rock music. The truck, an imposing silhouette against the moonless sky, seemed to hum with a sinister energy, its windows reflecting the distant streetlights like malevolent eyes.

"The fuck is this? The truck's not even on!" one goon muttered, his voice a bewildered whisper. Unbeknownst to them, Jordan, a phantom in the night, had tucked two small bone conduction speakers into the truck's metallic frame. He had transformed the entire vehicle into a monstrous speaker, powered by an old MP3 player, a deceptively simple yet brilliant stratagem. He lay hidden in the truck bed, a coiled spring of vengeance, patiently waiting.

"Where the fuck is the noise coming from?" the other gangster demanded, his voice edged with a growing unease, his eyes darting frantically around the silent street.

Goon 1, driven by a mixture of curiosity and a desperate need for answers, stepped cautiously towards the truck. He yanked open the door, his gaze sweeping the empty interior, baffled by the truck's apparent vacancy. A shot rang out, impossibly close, shattering the night's eerie calm. Jordan, his pistol propped on the truck's frame, had fired. Goon 1 crumpled to the ground, a clean, swift shot to the face.

Goon 2, propelled by a surge of adrenaline and a primal instinct for survival, immediately returned fire. Bullets ricocheted off the truck's sturdy metal frame, sparking like angry fireflies in the darkness. Jordan heard the distinct, sickening click of the gun misfiring. In that fleeting, crucial moment, he rose, a silhouette against the night, standing tall and resolute in the truck bed. He fired. Goon 2 fell, a bullet precisely lodged between his eyes.

With both men dead, their bodies sprawled like broken dolls on the pavement, Jordan sprang from the truck. His gaze was fixed on the shifting shadows in the safe house window, a predator spotting its next prey. Five quick, precise shots, each one a harbinger of death, and another man inside the safe house dropped, his scream abruptly cut short.

He moved with a chilling efficiency, melting into the ensuing confusion, seeking cover behind a neighboring fence. The sudden flare of a motion light from the neighbor's house illuminated Chris and Tyler as they burst out, pistols in hand,

charging blindly towards the light, their faces contorted with a desperate, ill-placed courage.

"Too stupid to waste bullets on..." Jordan whispered to himself, his voice a low, dangerous murmur. He holstered his pistol, its work temporarily done. From an ankle holster, he drew a six-inch hunting knife, the blade glinting wickedly in the faint light. He crouched low, a coiled spring of vengeance, ready to pounce.

Tyler, the first to stumble into Jordan's line of sight, let out a single, piercing scream as Jordan's blade plunged through his heart, twisting with a sickening finality.

"Tyler!!!!" Chris Mule shrieked, his voice raw with a desperate horror, and he began firing wildly, a chaotic spray of bullets. Some struck Tyler's now limp body as Jordan, using the fallen man as a gruesome shield, rammed into Chris, knocking him to the ground with brutal force.

As Jordan approached, a grim reaper in human form, Chris opened his mouth, perhaps to threaten, perhaps to plead, but his words morphed into agonizing screams as Jordan fired a shot into both his legs.

"You stupid fucker! Please! Don't!" Chris pleaded, tears streaming down his face, his voice a pathetic whimper in the cold night air, punctuated by the ragged gasps that tore from his chest. His body, already broken from the initial assault,

trembled uncontrollably, each spasm sending fresh waves of agony through his mangled legs. The fear in his eyes was absolute, a raw, primal terror that mirrored the agony contorting his features. He clutched desperately at the icy ground, trying to crawl away, to find some meager escape from the looming shadow of Jordan.

Jordan's gaze grew cold, an icy disdain replacing the primal rage that had driven him moments before. He was beyond the petty satisfaction of Chris's suffering; he was annoyed by the pleas, by the pathetic display of weakness. To him, Chris was not a man, but a obstacle, a worm begging for mercy it hadn't earned. He walked over to Chris, his movements deliberate, unhurried, as if savoring the final moments of his victim's futile resistance. With a sickening thud, he stomped both feet, with all his weight, into the fresh gunshot wounds on Chris's legs. A grotesque crunch echoed in the stillness, the sound of bone grating against bone, a testament to the brutal force applied.

"Motherfucker!" Chris cried out, a broken, inhuman sound torn from his throat, a guttural scream of pure, unadulterated pain that quickly dissolved into ragged gasps. His body arched, then slammed back against the frozen earth, his limbs spasming uncontrollably.

"Did you kill Brent?" Jordan's voice was a deep growl, a chilling fusion of rage and a cold, implacable certainty. It was

not a question seeking information, but a demand for a confession, a pronouncement of guilt.

Chris shook his head violently, denying it, his face a mask of terror, contorted by the agony radiating from his shattered legs. His lips trembled, trying to form words, but only choked whimpers escaped.

"You lying to me, bitch?!" Jordan's anger mounted, a palpable wave of fury radiating from him, a raw, almost physical force that seemed to push the very air out of Chris's lungs. His eyes, usually sharp and focused, now burned with an infernal light.

More goons charged from the safe house, drawn by Chris's agonizing screams, their faces a mixture of confusion and aggression, their weapons raised in a chaotic display of intent. They were a ragged assortment, hardened by years of petty crime, but utterly unprepared for the whirlwind of destruction they were about to encounter. Jordan immediately opened fire, his movements fluid, deadly, emptying his magazine in a blur of motion. Each shot found its mark with an unnerving precision, a brutal symphony of death. The goons crumpled, a chaotic pile of bodies on the ground, their lives snuffed out before they could even understand the threat.

Chris heard Jordan's gun click, empty, the sound echoing ominously in the sudden silence that had fallen over the scene. A broken laugh, mixed with sobs, escaped him, a sound of

desperate, deluded triumph. "Out of bullets? You stupid cocksucker!" he wheezed, a flicker of defiance in his pain-racked eyes, believing for a fleeting moment that he had been granted a reprieve.

Jordan tilted his head, a predatory gleam in his eyes, a silent answer to Chris's pathetic taunt. He squatted down, his movements economical, deliberate, as if performing a ritual. He ripped the knife from Tyler's body, the sound a wet, visceral tear of flesh and fabric, and held the blood-slicked blade to Chris's neck, the cold steel a stark contrast to Chris's feverish skin. "I don't need them..." he murmured, his voice a low, chilling whisper that promised an even more agonizing end than a bullet.

Chris's eyes widened, his final realization a flash of pure terror that eclipsed even the pain. The deluded triumph vanished, replaced by an understanding of his imminent demise. He gurgled, a gruesome symphony of his own blood, as Jordan slit his throat. His hands clawed weakly at the wound, his body convulsing, before he fell silent, his eyes staring blankly at the cold night sky. With the entourage dispatched, their lives snuffed out in a brutal ballet of vengeance, a landscape of twisted limbs and pooling blood, Jordan was left to confront the nightmare that had consumed his life, the long-awaited reckoning.

He holstered his knife, the weight of the night's gruesome work settling upon him, not as a burden, but as a grim sat-

isfaction. He walked towards the pile of bodies in front of the safe house, a landscape of death, his eyes scanning the carnage with a chilling detachment. Amidst the twisted limbs and pooling blood, he found an automatic pistol, its cold steel a familiar comfort in his hand. He picked it up, checking the clip with practiced ease, the click of the mechanism a prelude to the coming storm.

"Carlos Delgado!" Jordan roared, his voice carrying the weight of years of simmering rage, a primal scream of vengeance that echoed across the desolate landscape. His eyes, burning with an almost supernatural intensity, were fixed on Carlos's transport van, a dark, hulking presence in the night. He unloaded the weapon, bullets smashing glass, popping tires, a chaotic symphony of destruction that tore through the relative silence.

"Carlos Delgado! Get your pathetic ass out here, you rat!" Jordan threw the empty gun aside, the clatter a defiant exclamation point. His arms spread wide in a gesture of challenge, a silhouette of vengeance against the backdrop of the ruined van. "You want me? I'm right here!"

Blade in hand, a silent promise of death, Jordan charged into the safe house, a force of nature unleashed, ready to finally confront the architect of his suffering. Each step was a testament to his resolve, each breath a fuel for the inferno raging within him.

Jordan burst into the safe house, the adrenaline still coursing through his veins from the chaotic street fight outside, a tangible buzz beneath his skin, a lingering phantom of violence. The air still hummed with the echoes of gunfire and the screams of the dying, but the fight wasn't over. As he stepped through the threshold, the oppressive silence of the safe house was a stark contrast to the cacophony he'd just escaped. The air within grew heavy, charged with a predatory stillness that raised the hairs on his neck. A subtle shift in the shadows of the ceiling, a barely perceptible ripple in the oppressive darkness, heralded the arrival of his nemesis. A dark silhouette detached itself with the silent grace of a predator, dropping with the deadly precision of a viper striking its prey. Carlos. His eyes, twin points of malevolent light in the gloom, fixed on Jordan with an unsettling intensity, a venomous smile playing on his lips, a promise of pain and suffering.

Carlos tucked his body low, a coiled spring of malevolent intent, every muscle tensed for the kill, and charged. He moved with a speed that defied human expectation, a blur of motion in the dim light, a living phantom of destruction. The first stab ripped through the air, a whisper of honed steel, a harbinger of agony, finding its mark just beneath Jordan's custom-fit armor, a searing pain blooming across his side, a fiery jolt that threatened to buckle his knees. Then another, and another, a relentless flurry of brutal thrusts, each one a testament to Carlos's deadly skill, his movements a horrifying dance of death. The air filled with the metallic tang of blood, thick and cloying, the harsh sound of tearing flesh, and the

guttural grunts of exertion from both men as their desperate, primal dance of survival began.

Adrenaline, a potent cocktail of fear and fury, surged through Jordan's veins, a raw, primal power that allowed him to push past the searing pain, to transcend the limits of human endurance. A guttural roar, raw and primal, tore from his lips as he seized Carlos by his sides, his grip like iron bands, transforming himself into a human centrifuge, spinning with explosive, devastating force. Carlos was launched across the room, a ragdoll propelled by pure, unadulterated rage, an object of contempt hurled with savage abandon. The massive flat-screen television, a monument to consumerism dominating the far wall, exploded into a shower of sparks and shattered glass as Carlos's body slammed into it, a symphony of destruction.

Carlos rose from the wreckage, a lunatic's cackle echoing through the ruined room, a sound that scraped against Jordan's raw nerves, a chilling testament to his derangement. "So this is the scary El Grand Cabron I kept hearing about?" he rasped, his voice thick with a mirth that chilled Jordan to the bone, a perverse enjoyment of the agony he inflicted. He sighed dramatically, a grotesque smile stretching across his face, a clear sign of the perverse enjoyment he gleaned from this brutal dance, this macabre performance. "You're a big bastard, alright," he screamed, his voice raw with a twisted exhilaration, "But a massive pussy!"

Jordan held his ground, his gaze unwavering, a storm gathering in their depths, a silent promise of impending retribution.

"My father, my uncle... they were so afraid of you," Carlos panted, his breath heavy, his eyes gleaming with an unholy light, the madness within him shining through. "But not me, Cabron! Not me!"

A smirk, cold and unforgiving as a winter wind, touched Jordan's lips, a subtle yet profound declaration of contempt. "Your uncle I had a shred of respect for. But your father? The dickless, wife-beating moron..."

Carlos exploded. "Don't you dare talk about my father!" he shrieked, his voice cracking with a pure, unadulterated rage that mirrored Jordan's own, a primal scream of fury. "He was everything to me! And you killed him! And that's why I killed your bitch!"

Jordan's gaze went arctic, a frigid storm brewing in their depths, threatening to consume everything in its path, a silent, terrifying descent into pure, unadulterated fury.

Carlos's smirk widened, a truly monstrous expression that twisted his features into something unrecognizable, a grotesque caricature of human evil. "I killed a lot of little sluts. Chop 'em up when they outlived their purpose. But your bitch, Cabron?" He paused, savoring the moment, drawing

out the torment, prolonging Jordan's agony with sadistic glee. "She was a fighter."

Jordan began to inch closer, a terrifying stillness in his movements, the calm before the storm, the deceptive quiet before the destructive hurricane.

"Oh, don't you wanna hear the story?" Carlos taunted, picking up a wicked shard of broken glass, a jagged tooth of destruction, waving it like a conductor's baton, orchestrating Jordan's despair, each word a twisted note in a horrifying symphony. "I'll tell you! To be honest, I didn't know she was your girl until she was dead. I just saw the pictures of you two in that house... it was too perfect! Then I watched my masterpiece at work on the news... only to find out your bitch was pregnant! But hey!" He pointed the glass to a fresh, jagged scar marring his cheek. "If it makes you feel any better... she's the one that gave me this scar!"

Rage, pure and blinding, consumed Jordan, a molten inferno that threatened to incinerate him from the inside out, a firestorm of vengeance. He charged, a whirlwind of vengeance, a force of nature unleashed, grabbing Carlos by the throat, his fingers digging deep into the flesh, and throwing him towards the closed doorway of what could only be a torture chamber. The impact dislodged a covering, revealing a number pad, glowing faintly in the dim light, a beacon of grim possibility. Jordan's eyes locked onto it, a grim realization dawning, a horrifying understanding of what lay beyond.

He seized Carlos from behind his head, his grip like a vice, and slammed the man's face repeatedly into the keypad. A sickening crunch echoed through the room with each impact, each blow a testament to Jordan's brutal resolve. The door, damaged and groaning on its hinges, slowly opened, revealing a gaping black maw, a terrifying portal into the abyss.

Seeing his opportunity, Jordan hurled Carlos down the darkened stairs, a limp sack of broken bones, then followed him into the abyss, a hunter descending into the depths of hell, his vengeance his only guide.

Carlos landed in a crumpled heap at the bottom of the stairs, barely conscious, his body limp and broken from Jordan's brutal assault, a pathetic testament to his shattered hubris. A flicker of realization sparked in his fading eyes – he had gravely underestimated Jordan's capabilities, a fatal mistake, a miscalculation that would cost him everything.

Jordan descended the stairs, each step quieter than the last as the horrifying tableau unfolded before him, a grim and silent witness to unspeakable atrocities. Bloodied chains hung from the ceiling like grotesque decorations, grim reminders of past agonies, torn clothes lay scattered across the grimy floor, and undeniable traces of dried blood stained the saw-scratched table. No forensic analysis was needed; the story of unspeakable horrors was written in the grime and gore of the room, etched into the very fabric of the space. The stench of decay and fear hung heavy in the air, a cloying, oppressive

presence that clawed at Jordan's throat, a constant reminder of the depravity he had just witnessed.

Mila, a silent observer hidden from Jordan's gaze, was paralyzed by a horror that hammered against her ribs like a trapped bird. The man responsible for her nightmare lay broken, a tenuous thread of life barely clinging to his battered form. Jordan, however, was consumed by a blinding rage, his vision narrowed to the visceral proof of Carlos's depravity. He saw only one horrifying conclusion, completely unaware that his new love, a ghost in the shadows, was mere feet away, a silent witness to his descent.

With a savage, jerky strength, Jordan hauled Carlos's limp body from the ground and flung him onto the saw-scarred table. The impact sent a hidden cordless circular saw clattering to the concrete floor, its dull blade glinting ominously in the dim light.

Mila, her heart a frantic drumbeat of terror, struggled desperately against her restraints. Muffled screams, the frantic rattling of chains – she needed to make any sound, any desperate plea to pierce through Jordan's tunnel vision, to drag him back from the precipice of his own darkness.

"Jordan! Jordan! Please don't do it!" her muffled cries begged, choked and desperate, echoing faintly in the oppressive silence.

Jordan squeezed the trigger of the power saw. The blade barely spun, emitting a pathetic whirring sound – the battery was dead. A grim determination etched itself onto his face as he gripped the saw between his hands, raising the dull, heavy blade high above his head, transforming it into a macabre executioner's axe.

"Jordan! Jordan!" Mila's muffled pleas continued, tears streaming down her face as she fought against her bonds, a desperate struggle against the encroaching nightmare that threatened to consume them both.

He brought the blade down, slamming it into Carlos, uncaring where it landed, a primal scream tearing from his own throat. Tears welled in Carlos's eyes; he hadn't thought Jordan capable of crossing this line, of descending into such depths of savagery. With every brutal slam, Jordan felt the searing pain and suffocating fear of his victims, a horrifying echo of their suffering resonating deep within him. Over and over again, his internal monster raged, finding no satisfaction in the horrors it inflicted, only a deeper, more profound emptiness.

In a desperate surge of will, fueled by pure, unadulterated terror and an unwavering love, Mila managed to slip her tongue through her lips, weakening the adhesive of the duct tape just enough to draw a ragged gasp of life in the suffocating chamber. With a sickening crunch of breaking bones, a horrifying symphony of sacrifice, she pulled her hands through the wrist restraints.

She stumbled to Jordan, her legs unsteady, screaming his name, throwing herself into his chest, pleading with every fiber of her being.

"Stop! He got what he deserved, just stop! Please, my Sunshine, don't be him!"

The shock of Mila witnessing his descent, of seeing him lose control again, of her fragile, broken body pressed against his, was enough to drag Jordan back to reality, to tear him from the clutches of his monstrous rage.

"Mila... my moon..." he whispered, his voice weak, strained, a raw wound of tenderness laid bare.

Mila stepped back, her fearful gaze searching his eyes, tears of terror streaming down her face at the thought of losing him, of seeing him consumed by the very darkness he fought against. The sight of her, alive, breathing, her face streaked with tears, brought a momentary, fragile calm to Jordan's ravaged heart.

"I'm... I'm sorry..." he whispered, barely audible, a profound regret etched into his voice.

The tender reunion, a fragile moment of solace in the heart of horror, was brutally cut short as Jordan's injuries, ignored in his all-consuming rage, caught up to him with a vengeance.

A violent coughing fit wracked his body, a desperate gasp for air, and then, a spray of blood on Mila's face before he collapsed to the ground, his body giving way.

Carlos was gone, vanished into the shadows, a specter of vengeance melting into the oppressive gloom. Mila dove to Jordan, her scream tearing through the air, a raw, primal sound of despair that echoed off the cold concrete walls.

"Jordan, no, please don't die! Please!"

The wail of police sirens pierced the silence, growing louder with each passing second, a siren song of impending chaos. Red and blue lights flickered through the gloom, casting macabre, dancing shadows, reflecting in the grime and gore of the torture chamber. Mila's screams intensified, a desperate, guttural plea to the approaching world beyond the walls.

"Help! Please help!"

From Jordan's weakening ears, Mila's urgent cries for help began to recede, dissolving into a brilliant, ethereal white light that enveloped and overwhelmed his senses. It was a light unlike anything he had ever seen, a purity that seemed to cleanse the very air around him, washing away the horrors of the chamber. He awakened to find himself sitting on a simple wooden bench at Riverside Park, a familiar solace, yet everything felt profoundly different, imbued with an otherworldly

glow. He was still in his bloodied uniform, a stark reminder of the chaos he had just endured. The deep, throbbing tenderness of his wounds made every subtle movement a painful ordeal, a constant ache that resonated deep within his bones. Yet, despite the pain, the scene before him was one of utter, breathtaking peace. The ethereal white light permeated everything, making the sparkles of the nearby river glisten with an intensity and brilliance Jordan had never witnessed, a vibrant dance of light on water that seemed to whisper of secrets untold, of worlds beyond the veil.

Was he dead, he pondered, a chilling thought that settled heavily in his chest, a cold knot of uncertainty, or was this merely a vivid, poignant dream from which he would soon awaken, dragged back to the agonizing reality he had just escaped? The air was still, save for the gentle rustle of leaves in a non-existent breeze, and a profound, almost sacred silence hung over the park, broken only by the gentle lapping of the river against its banks, a soft, rhythmic lullaby in the newfound peace.

"You made quite the mess, haven't you, Jordan?" a soft, melodic voice chimed, brimming with an inexplicable warmth and a knowing smile that transcended the ethereal setting.

Jordan, startled, slowly turned his head towards a small, verdant hill nearby. There, bathed in the same radiant white light, stood Courtney. She was a vision of breathtaking

beauty, adorned in an elegant white dress that seemed to shimmer with an inner luminescence, a dress that flowed around her like liquid moonlight. Holding her hand, a tiny hand that barely reached her hip, was a little girl, no older than two or three years old.

She was a miniature reflection of Courtney, with the same captivating eyes and the hint of a shy, innocent smile. The little girl, with an unbridled joy that seemed to sparkle from her very being, waved at Jordan, a small hand fluttering in a greeting that pulled at his heartstrings. Jordan, his legs heavy as if made of lead, slowly pushed himself to his feet. He found himself hardly able to speak, his throat tight with a mixture of disbelief and an overwhelming surge of emotion, unable even to string a coherent thought together. The woman he had loved and lost, the woman he had mourned with every fiber of his being, now stood before him, impossibly real, impossibly radiant.

The ethereal quiet of the afterlife, or perhaps, a place beyond, was pierced by a tiny, vibrant burst of pure energy. It was Roselyn, Jordan's daughter, who, with an almost unbelievable confidence, pulled her hand from Courtney's gentle grasp. Her steps, light and joyful, carried her directly towards Jordan. Each delicate footfall on the unseen ground was like a hammer striking Jordan's heart, not in pain, but in a slow, wondrous awakening. With every inch she closed the distance, a profound, undeniable truth began to bloom within his mind, clarifying, with an almost painful beauty, the impos-

sible reality of who she was. Despite the lingering protest of his injured body, Jordan instinctively knelt, his heart soaring with a joy he thought long lost, to meet her at eye level. His gaze, raw with emotion, fixed on her innocent, knowing eyes, a silent plea for confirmation.

"Hi Daddy!" she exclaimed, her voice a pure, unadulterated chime of joy, a sound that resonated deep within his soul. A wide, heart-melting smile stretched across her face, radiating an innocent love that threatened to shatter him.

"Rose?" Jordan whispered, his voice thick with a mixture of disbelief and profound emotion. A blissful, trembling smile, a smile he hadn't felt in what seemed like an eternity, finally graced his lips, a testament to the miracle unfolding before him.

Roselyn, a vision of childlike innocence and unconditional love, smiled brightly in confirmation, her nod a silent affirmation that resonated deep within Jordan's very being. Overwhelmed, utterly consumed by a joy so profound it felt like a physical ache, a joy he had longed for with every fiber of his being but never truly believed he would experience again, Jordan swiftly wrapped Roselyn in a tight, protective hug. He lifted her effortlessly off the ground, cradling her close. He buried his face in her soft, sweet-smelling hair, inhaling her innocent scent, a scent that brought back a flood of cherished memories. "I'm so happy to finally meet you! I missed you so much!" he exclaimed, his voice cracking with the sheer, un-

bearable weight of his emotions, tears freely streaming down his face, a testament to the depth of his unspoken grief and newfound happiness. This was a moment he had only dared to dream of, a meeting that transcended the boundaries of life and death, a reunion that defied all logic.

Roselyn, with the innate wisdom and comforting embrace of a child, held her father tightly, her small arms wrapped securely around his neck. The boundless, unconditional love between father and daughter seemed to flow through Jordan, a warm, healing balm that permeated his very being, soothing the jagged edges of his tormented soul. As if by magic, as her love enveloped him, the tattered, bloodied uniform he still wore from his last, brutal battle transformed. He found himself inexplicably donning a pristine, elegant white suit, a suit that seemed to symbolize a renewed sense of peace, a fresh beginning, and a release from the burdens he had carried.

Courtney, her own eyes brimming with tears that mirrored Jordan's, walked gracefully towards them, her steps light, almost ethereal. A gentle, knowing smile graced her lips, a blend of profound sorrow for their shared past and an even deeper understanding of their present, etched on her beautiful face.

"Am I..." Jordan began, his voice still hoarse with raw emotion, the unspoken question hanging heavy in the ethereal air between them. Was this the final destination? Was he fi-

nally home with them, forever released from the burdens of his earthly life?

"No. You're just visiting," Courtney said, her voice soft yet firm, a comforting reassurance that both grounded him and stirred a fresh wave of longing. Her smile deepened, a radiant glow that touched his very soul, illuminating the path forward. "It finally felt like it was time to talk, Jordan. Time for everything to become clear, for the truth to unfold." She gently wiped away the tears that traced paths down her cheeks, her gaze unwavering as she looked at the man she loved, the man who had sacrificed so much. Roselyn, still nestled securely on Jordan's shoulder, smiled contentedly, her head resting against him, a silent testament to their unbreakable, eternal bond.

"I only did what I had to do, Courtney... I had no other choice," Jordan said, his voice raw with the lingering anguish of his recent battles, the heavy burden of responsibility and guilt still weighing on his conscience, a constant companion since their tragic departure.

"I know, my love, I know," Courtney said, her voice filled with an understanding that transcended words, a profound empathy that washed over him like a warm, gentle wave, soothing his troubled spirit. She stepped closer to Jordan, her movements fluid and graceful, and gently rested her hand on his cheek. The touch, so familiar, so cherished, brought an immediate sense of warmth that spread through Jordan's entire

being, a warmth he had longed for with an aching intensity that had defined his existence since her passing.

As she slowly slid her hand down to his chest, her touch lingering over his heart, a silent testament to the love that bound them, Courtney took a deep, fortifying breath, her gaze holding his, conveying a message of profound importance. "I want you to know, Jordan, truly know, that as long as this heart of yours still beats for the right reasons, for justice, for love, for compassion... Rose and I will never truly be gone from your life. We will always be with you, in spirit, in memory, in love. It wasn't your fault what happened. None of it was your fault, Jordan. The choices you made were born of necessity, of sacrifice, of a desperate attempt to protect. But I don't want you to feel like you have to isolate yourself from the world because of it. Don't let guilt or grief consume you, my love. Live."

Jordan frowned, the weight of her words settling deep in his heart, a complex mixture of relief and renewed pain. He gently kissed Roselyn's soft hand, a silent promise to his beloved daughter, as he placed his free hand over Courtney's, intertwining their fingers, a gesture of unwavering connection. "It was too hard to carry on without you, without either one of you..." he confessed, his voice a broken whisper, the raw pain of his immeasurable loss still fresh, a gaping wound in his soul.

"I know, honey... I know how difficult it was," Courtney said, her own frown deepening, tears welling in her eyes once more, mirroring his pain, their grief a shared burden. "But there are so many more people who need you right now, Jordan. People who depend on you, who look to you for strength and guidance, for hope. Paisley and her baby, your mom, Mila, Dr. Martin... They and so many more need you, truly need you, in ways you cannot yet comprehend. The families of those who died in this fight, those you tried to protect with your very life, will both love and hate you. Their grief will be immense, their understanding sometimes limited, their anger misplaced. But, regardless of how they perceive you, I want you to promise me something, Jordan. A promise that will guide you forward, a beacon in the darkness."

Roselyn, sensing the profound gravity of the moment, lifted her head from her father's shoulder, her innocent eyes filled with an unshakeable belief in him, a quiet strength that transcended her tender years. She leaned in close, her tiny lips brushing against his ear, her voice a comforting, clear whisper, full of childlike conviction. "Listen to her, Daddy. Please listen to Mommy."

Courtney took a quick, decisive breath, her resolve firm and unwavering, as she stared deep into Jordan's eyes. Her gaze was piercing, a direct, unwavering line that seemed to penetrate straight to his soul, seeing beyond the surface to the very core of his being.

"Promise me that you will always be the man I fell in love with," she implored, her voice a soft, earnest whisper that held the weight of their shared past and an uncertain future. "The man I know Mila fell in love with—always be him and no one else. The good, loving, understanding man who was willing to go to war, not caring how much of himself he had to sacrifice, for someone he just met because it was right. That compassionate, selfless man who put others before himself. Be him, be you, in every action, every thought. Promise me, Jordan. Promise me you will continue to live by the values that define you, that define the hero you truly are." Each word was a plea, a desperate hope that the essence of the man she adored would remain untainted by the trials they had faced and those yet to come.

A profound silence settled between them, heavy with unspoken emotions and the gravity of Courtney's request. Jordan's eyes, usually so vibrant and full of life, reflected a deep, aching sadness. He longed to give her the unequivocal assurance she sought, but the words seemed to catch in his throat, held captive by the raw pain of their impending separation.

With a gentle, almost imperceptible movement, Courtney took Roselyn's hand, a silent signal that their ethereal time together was drawing to a close. It was a gesture of tender finality, a quiet acceptance of the inevitable. Jordan instinctively wrapped his free hand around both of theirs, a desperate, almost primal attempt to hold onto this precious, fleeting moment for just a little longer. His throat tightened, a raw ache

blooming in his chest, a physical manifestation of the grief welling up inside him.

"I just wanted to remember you," Jordan choked out, the words tearing through him, ragged and raw. They were accompanied by a torrent of tears that streamed down his face, blurring his vision until Courtney and Roselyn were just shimmering outlines, haloed by the light of his sorrow. He wanted this vivid, real connection, this profound love, to last forever, etched into the very fabric of his being, a permanent imprint on his soul. The thought of their fading filled him with an unbearable dread, a sense of loss that transcended all understanding.

Courtney Freeman's smile was soft, a gentle, comforting light amidst his despair, like a beacon in the encroaching darkness. "We will always be with you, Jordan," she reassured him, her voice a melodic whisper, a soothing balm to his wounded spirit. "You'll see proof of that soon." Her words carried an undercurrent of hope, a mysterious promise of a future connection that offered a glimmer of comfort in his grief.

With a tender grace, she took Roselyn from Jordan's trembling arms. Roselyn, her eyes wide and full of a love that transcended understanding, looked back at her father, her small hand reaching out, a silent plea for him to hold on, to remember.

"Do you promise, Daddy?" Roselyn Lambert-Freeman asked, her innocent voice cutting through Jordan's grief like a sharp, poignant note. Her question, so simple yet so profound, echoed Courtney's earlier plea, amplifying its emotional weight.

Jordan, utterly overwhelmed by the magnitude of the emotion, by the crushing reality of their impending departure, could only nod. He was unable to articulate the profound promise forming in his heart, a vow that would shape his every action from that moment forward. As his tears fell, heavy and hot, tracing paths through the dust of his sorrow, the beautiful vision of love began to fade. It dissolved slowly, not in a sudden jolt, but as a shimmering mist, gradually becoming less distinct, less substantial. All three of them, their faces imbued with an otherworldly glow that spoke of their ethereal nature, mouthed one last, heartfelt 'I Love You' to each other, a silent vow hanging in the air, a final testament to their unbreakable bond.

The scene, bathed in the tender glow of their love, then faded to a blinding white light, stark and sudden, a profound and complete transition that marked the end of his ethereal journey. It was a final, undeniable sign that this sacred encounter, born of memory and longing, had reached its poignant conclusion, leaving Jordan alone in the silence, forever changed by the love he had found and lost, and the promises he now carried within his soul.

9

Peace

A week had passed since the incident, and for Jordan, it felt like an eternity compressed into a single, agonizing blur. The intense, blinding white light that had consumed him finally began its slow retreat, gradually unveiling the stark reality of his surroundings. He found himself in an unfamiliar hospital bed, the sterile confines of the Trauma Ward amplifying the sense of disquiet. Beside him, a comforting anchor in the stormy sea of his disorientation, was Mila. Her bandaged hands, a testament to the ordeal she had endured, gently stroked his face, a silent promise of her unwavering vigilance. Her presence was a balm to his fractured senses, a quiet reassurance that he wasn't alone.

Jordan stirred, a groan escaping his lips as his eyelids fluttered open. He slowly pushed himself up, his mind thick with a persistent fog, struggling to piece together the fragmented memories of his recent experience. The lingering haze made it difficult to process the unfamiliar surroundings. Mila, her movements quick and anxious, practically leaped to her feet,

a flicker of raw fear in her eyes. She worried that her sudden movement might have caused him pain, that his awakening might have been difficult.

"Jordan, are you here?" Mila Sabirova asked, her voice hushed, a delicate blend of fragile hope and palpable trepidation. The question itself was odd, a testament to the uncertainty that had plagued her during his unconsciousness.

Jordan looked at her, confusion clouding his gaze at the peculiar inquiry, but he nodded, a silent affirmation of his presence, of his return. His eyes continued their slow, deliberate roam, taking in the intricate medical equipment surrounding him, the muted, almost clinical colors of the room. Finally, his gaze settled on the casts encasing Mila's hands, a stark visual that immediately triggered a wave of agonizing worry in his chest.

"Oh my god, what happened?" Jordan Lambert asked, his voice raw with a profound concern. The lingering effects of the medication were unable to mask the immediate surge of alarm that coursed through him.

Mila stood beside his bed, a faint, almost wistful smile gracing her lips. "How do you think I managed to break free to stop you?" she replied, a hint of irony lacing her tone. Yet, underlying it was the deep, unspoken affection she held for him, a testament to the sacrifices she had made.

Jordan, despite his own physical discomfort, reached out. His uninjured arm instinctively pulled her close, a desperate need for contact, for reassurance. He buried his face in her hair, murmuring, "I'm just happy you're safe," his voice thick with unbridled emotion, gratitude, and a profound sense of relief.

Just then, the door to the room swung open, and a nurse walked in, her movements brisk and purposeful. She jumped slightly when she saw Jordan was awake, a genuine surprise lighting up her face. "Mr. Lambert! You're awake!" she exclaimed, her voice cheerful but unmistakably professional.

Jordan attempted to adjust himself in the bed, a wave of sharp, searing pain washing over him. His arm instinctively wrapped around his waist, an unconscious effort to mask the discomfort that gnawed at him.

"Jordan, relax," Mila Sabirova said, her voice instantly filled with worry and tenderness, her hand gently resting on his shoulder, a comforting weight. "Your injuries almost took you..."

"She's right," Nurse 2 affirmed, stepping closer to the bed, her gaze softening slightly as she took in Jordan's discomfort. "When you arrived at the hospital, you were taken straight into surgery. It was touch and go for a while there, a true miracle that you managed to pull through. Though you've been

in and out of consciousness for about a week. Your girlfriend was here the entire time, a true rock, never leaving your side."

Jordan looked towards Mila, his eyes filled with a profound gratitude and an overwhelming love. A soft, loving smile slowly spread across his face, a stark contrast to the pain that still gnawed at him, a physical manifestation of the deep connection they shared.

"The police may be by later to ask you some questions about what happened," Nurse 2 continued, her tone shifting slightly to a more formal, almost cautionary note. "If you're not feeling too unwell, that is."

Jordan rubbed his face, a weary sigh escaping him. "I'm a bit groggy, but I'll answer what I can," he replied, already anticipating the difficult and emotionally taxing conversations that lay ahead.

"Given the state you were in when you first arrived, that's to be expected," Nurse 2 said, her voice softening once more, a touch of empathy in her tone. "I'll be by to check on you later, Mr. Lambert. Please try to rest."

Jordan nodded, acknowledging the nurse's departure. The quiet left behind felt heavy, almost charged with a tension that mirrored the unspoken words hanging between him and Mila. Mila looked at him, her heart a leaden weight in her chest. She knew the news she had to deliver would cast a

shadow, a somber cloud that already seemed to be gathering, darkening the space between them with its impending gloom.

"You really stayed?" Jordan's voice was barely a whisper, a raw, disbelieving sound that carried a hint of profound vulnerability. The simple question hung in the air, a silent testament to the depth of her unwavering devotion, a wonder at the selflessness he hadn't dared to expect.

Mila Sabirova's eyes shimmered, a fresh wave of tears welling up, threatening to spill over. Her voice, thick with emotion, was barely audible as she whispered, "I couldn't leave you alone." The unspoken fear of what horrors might have unfolded if she hadn't stayed, if she had abandoned him in his moment of greatest need, hung heavy between them, a chilling silence that spoke volumes.

"Thank you," Jordan murmured, his gratitude profound and heartfelt, a quiet acknowledgment of the immense comfort her presence brought.

Mila wiped her eyes with the back of her bandaged hand, taking a shaky, bracing breath. The words that followed were barely above a whisper, their gravity palpable. "I need to tell you what happened while you were sleeping."

Jordan took a deep, fortifying breath, mentally steeling himself for Mila's impending news. He could sense the emotional blow approaching, a dark wave on the horizon, and he

braced himself, his gaze unwavering, prepared for whatever revelation she was about to share.

"Jordan... Officer Caleb Winston is dead," Mila Sabirova said, her voice a chilling pronouncement in the quiet room, barely a whisper yet shattering the silence. "He was in a shooting and was shot in the head."

A sharp, unwelcome pain, a mirroring echo of the deep ache that already plagued his battered body, signaled the first sting of Jordan's tears. The world, already a blurred canvas of agony and profound confusion, tilted violently once more on its axis, threatening to plunge him into a darkness deeper and more absolute than any he had ever known.

"Jesus, Caleb... I warned him something was wrong..." Jordan whispered, the words catching in his raw throat, each syllable a struggle against the rising tide of grief and guilt that threatened to overwhelm him. His mind frantically replayed flashes of their last conversation, a desperate, futile attempt to piece together the shattered fragments of what had happened, to find some meaning in the senseless tragedy.

Mila's voice, soft and hushed, yet strangely clear, cut through the hazy fog of his pain. "I think there's an investigation. I heard them mention his death being recorded. He died fighting..." Her words, though undoubtedly intended to offer some semblance of comfort, struck Jordan like a physical

blow, a fresh wave of nausea washing over him, churning in his gut.

The image of Caleb, strong and defiant, fighting to his last breath, was both a source of profound pride and an unbearable agony. Overwhelmed and dizzy with a potent cocktail of sorrow and the lingering, debilitating effects of his injuries, he lay back against the hospital bed. A trembling hand pressed firmly to his forehead, a desperate attempt to steady the spinning room, to bring some order to the chaotic storm raging within him.

"There's something else," Mila said, her voice now calm and steady, a firm anchor in his turbulent thoughts, gently but surely pulling him back from the precipice of despair. "Your mom and sister are here."

Jordan bolted upright, a sudden surge of adrenaline momentarily overriding the throbbing pain throughout his body. His mind raced, picturing a tense confrontation, his fiercely overprotective family clashing with the woman who had, in the span of days, become his unwavering lifeline. "Oh please tell me they weren't rude to you..."

Mila extended a hand, a gentle, reassuring gesture meant to quiet his worry. Her touch was cool and comforting against his feverish skin. "Jordan, your sister is here having the baby! And your mom, she wanted me to tell you that she's sorry." Mila paused, her gaze softening, a hint of something more

profound in her eyes, a deeper meaning to the apology. "She... she also apologized to me..."

Jordan stared at her, shock warring fiercely with the lingering disorientation of his injuries. The news of Paisley's baby, a beacon of new life amidst the profound darkness that had enveloped him, was almost too much to process alongside the staggering revelation of his mother's heartfelt apology. He was still processing the profound and precarious state he was in, the world spinning around him in a surreal tapestry of pain, grief, and unexpected joy.

"Are you okay, my Sunshine?" Mila asked, her concern palpable, her voice laced with the tenderness he had come to rely on, a soothing balm to his frayed nerves.

"As much as I can be," Jordan replied, his voice still raspy, a testament to the arduous ordeal he had endured. "But... much better knowing you're here and okay." His gaze devoured her, reassuring himself of her safety, drawing strength from the familiar, unwavering resolve in her eyes.

He pulled Mila into a passionate kiss, surprising her with his sudden intensity, a desperate, urgent need to feel her closeness, to ground himself in her presence, to anchor himself in her reality. She melted into it, her lips soft and yielding against his, the tender moment broken only by a gentle, hesitant knock at the door, pulling them back abruptly to the harsh realities of the hospital.

"Hey bud, how long have you been up?" Sheryl Miller's voice, tinged with a mix of surprise and palpable relief, drifted in from the hallway.

Jordan briefly rested his forehead against Mila's, a shared moment of intimate connection, a silent communion before facing the world again. "A few minutes. Why?" he asked, his voice strained, still grappling with the whirlwind of emotions that churned within him.

Sheryl sounded distinctly nervous, a subtle but noticeable shift in her tone. "I was just coming to check on you. But since you're up, if you feel okay enough to walk, want to come meet your niece?"

Jordan's eyes widened, a flicker of pure, unadulterated excitement overriding the lingering pain throughout his body. "She's here?" The thought of a new life, a tiny, innocent piece of his family, brought a much-needed warmth spreading through his chest, a comforting counterpoint to the grief.

Sheryl smiled, her relief evident in the joyful lightness of her voice. "She's here, and was born hungry!"

A shared chuckle, light and genuine, momentarily lightened the heavy, sterile air in the room, a moment of shared humanity and joy amidst the hospital's pervasive silence.

"I'll be down in a minute," Jordan said, already trying to shift his bruised and battered body, a fierce eagerness to meet the newest member of his family propelling him forward despite the pain.

"Just take it easy, bud. Mila will show you the way..." Sheryl hurried out, presumably back to Paisley in the maternity ward, leaving Jordan and Mila in a quiet cocoon of anticipation, the promise of new life hanging in the air.

Jordan slowly swung his legs out of bed, each movement a deliberate, agonizing act of will. His muscles screamed in protest, a week of disuse leaving them weak, trembling, and protesting every slight shift.

"Jordan!" Mila cried, rushing to his side, her voice laced with genuine concern, her hands hovering, ready to offer support, to catch him if he faltered. "Please, be gentle with yourself. You're still healing!"

Jordan smiled as he felt Mila brace herself, her slender frame preparing to support his weight, her strength a comforting and reassuring presence. "You really are one hell of a woman!" he chuckled, a genuine, mirthful laugh bubbling up despite the sharp pangs of pain.

Mila chuckled back, her eyes sparkling with warmth and deep affection. "Let's go see the baby."

With gentle, steady hands, she helped Jordan stand, and he instinctively grabbed his IV pole, leaning heavily on it, its cool metal a familiar, surprisingly comforting support. Each step was a testament to the brutal fight he had endured, a painful ordeal that sent shockwaves through his recovering body. His legs felt like jelly, trembling precariously beneath him, and his healing belly protested every subtle movement, sending sharp, searing jolts of pain through him. But Mila was a steady, unwavering presence by his side, her hand a firm, grounding anchor on his arm, guiding him, every agonizing step of the way, towards the promise of new beginnings, a future he was only just beginning to grasp, to truly envision.

As Jordan, still wobbly on his feet, stumbled out of his hospital room, his IV pole a cumbersome but necessary companion, Mila remained a silent sentinel by his side, her watchful presence a grounding comfort. Just as they cleared the doorway, the nurse from earlier caught sight of them. Her usually composed demeanor instantly shattered, her expression morphing into a startling mix of genuine surprise and immediate concern. Her eyebrows, typically arched with professional courtesy, now rose dramatically in alarm.

"Mr. Lambert, what are you doing? You should be resting!" she exclaimed, her voice, while gentle, carried an undeniable note of firm reprimand, a clear indication of her professional worry, bordering on exasperation.

Jordan, ever the charming rogue even in discomfort, offered a faint, almost mischievous smile that played on his lips. He leaned heavily on his IV pole, a visual testament to his fragile state. "Forgive my stubbornness," he began, his voice a little raspy, "but my younger sister is here and just had a baby—I'd like to go meet my niece." Mila, standing tall and steady beside him, offered a subtle nod, a silent confirmation of his story, her eyes twinkling with a knowing amusement that only enhanced Jordan's playful facade.

The nurse, after a moment of internal debate, finally exhaled a soft sigh, and a faint smile, a hint of warmth, finally touched her lips. "Alright. It's good to see you up and moving," she conceded, her tone softening considerably. "Just take it easy and don't try to lift anything over ten pounds."

Mila, with a playful smirk that sent ripples of amusement through her eyes, chimed in, "Don't worry. I will keep him in line!"

The nurse smiled back, a genuine warmth spreading across her entire face, erasing the last vestiges of her earlier concern. "Good. Congratulations on the new baby."

Jordan nodded, a wave of tenderness washing over him at the thought of his new niece. With Mila's unwavering guidance, her hand a steadying presence on his arm, they slowly, painstakingly, made their way towards the maternity ward.

Each step, though small and deliberate, felt like a significant victory in his recovery.

Moments later, the bustling hallway of the maternity ward enveloped them, a symphony of soft cooing babies, hushed conversations, and the occasional burst of joyful laughter. Mila, ever practical, helped Jordan search for Paisley's room. Jordan, still clutching his IV pole as if it were a lifeline tethering him to stability, approached a nurse at the central desk, a small, hopeful smile gracing his pale lips.

"Excuse me..." he began, his voice a little hoarse from disuse but filled with a palpable anticipation that belied his physical state.

The nurse, her eyes reflecting a mixture of fatigue from a long shift and an ingrained politeness, looked up from her computer screen.

"Can you tell me where Paisley Miller's room is?" Jordan asked, his gaze earnest, holding hers.

"Sure thing! What's your name?" The nurse, her fingers already flying across the keyboard, began typing with practiced speed.

Jordan flinched suddenly, a sharp, unexpected pain shooting through his belly—a brutal reminder of the recent trauma

he had endured. He swallowed, then managed to articulate, "Jordan Lambert."

The nurse stopped typing abruptly, her fingers frozen mid-air. Her eyes widened in sudden recognition, and a small gasp escaped her lips, a sound of pure astonishment. "Okay, Jorda... Oh! You're the guy from the news... you killed those smugglers." Her voice was a hushed whisper, a mixture of awe and disbelief, as if she were speaking to a ghost.

Jordan's eyes widened in turn, a faint blush rising to his cheeks, a mix of embarrassment and an odd sense of celebrity he was unaccustomed to. "Am I on the news or something?" he joked, though a tight knot of unease began to form in his stomach. The casual tone of the question belied the sudden discomfort he felt at being publicly identified with such a violent event.

Another nurse, who had been listening intently from just behind the desk, couldn't contain her excitement. She chimed in, her voice brimming with almost childlike enthusiasm, "Only like every other channel. You're a hero!"

Jordan's heart began to race, a dizzying mix of excitement and profound unease swirling within him. The word "hero" felt incredibly heavy, unfamiliar, and frankly, undeserved. It was a mantle he hadn't sought, and certainly hadn't asked for.

"Is it true what they're saying?" the second nurse pressed, her eyes wide with a burning curiosity that bordered on intrusive.

The first nurse, more attuned to human discomfort, noticed Jordan's rising disquiet. A flicker of understanding, a silent apology, crossed her gaze. "Maybe we shouldn't pry..." she said gently, her voice a soft, much-needed intervention that cut through the awkward tension.

Jordan nodded, grateful for the reprieve, for this small act of consideration. Mila, ever perceptive, stepped closer to his side, her presence a comforting anchor in the sudden whirlwind of public scrutiny.

"Come on," Mila said gently, her voice a soft whisper that was meant only for his ears, "your mom is waiting." She subtly took his arm, her touch a guiding force, skillfully redirecting him away from the questioning nurses and towards the promise of family.

Jordan looked down the hall and saw Sheryl, his mother, waving him over, a wide, relieved smile stretching across her face. He offered the nurses a quick, apologetic tap on the desk, a small gesture of dismissal. "Never mind," he said, his voice regaining some of its earlier strength, "I just found it."

Mila walked beside him, her hand a steadying presence on his arm, a silent pillar of support as he slowly, deliberately

made his way to the door where his mother stood. Sheryl was already inside, her gentle laughter echoing softly as she helped Paisley with the baby, a tiny bundle of new life, swaddled and precious. As they reached the doorway, Mila stopped, a subtle hesitation in her posture, a silent acknowledgement that this tender family moment was not hers to intrude upon.

"Go. Be with your family. I'll wait for you out here..." she said, her smile polite but distant, a subtle wall raising between them.

Jordan stopped, confused, his brow furrowed. "Why? Did they say something to you?" His gaze searched her face for answers.

"No, no, it's not that," Mila quickly assured him, her voice earnest, a slight flush creeping up her neck. "I just don't want to intrude." She gestured vaguely towards the bustling maternity ward, a hint of shyness in her eyes, as if the sheer normalcy of it felt alien after their recent ordeal.

Jordan stood in front of her, a loving smile spreading across his face, his heart overflowing with a tenderness that surprised even him. He leaned in, his breath warm against her ear as he whispered, "My love, after what we just went through, you're family now. More than family." His gaze softened, a deep, unwavering conviction in his eyes, as his thumb traced a gentle, reassuring line on her cheek, dispelling her lingering reservations as easily as a morning mist. "If anyone has

a problem with it," his voice dropped to a low, resolute rumble, leaving no room for argument, "they're just gonna have to deal."

Jordan smirked, a contented warmth spreading through him like sunshine, as Mila's smile, a radiant glow across her face, mirrored his own happiness. There was a newfound ease between them, a silent understanding forged in the crucible of shared danger. She gently helped him steady his IV pole, her touch a comforting anchor, as he held the hospital room door open. It was a silent, yet profound, invitation to step through, not just into a room, but into their new beginning, together, a sanctuary from the chaos they had endured.

Inside the quiet hum of the maternity ward, the air thick with the faint scent of antiseptic and new life, Sheryl, her expression a beautiful mix of maternal tenderness and sheer delight, cradled the brand-new baby girl. Paisley, exhausted but visibly content, her pale face still bearing the marks of arduous hours of labor, lay propped against pillows. As Mila and Jordan entered, a soft murmur of concern and awe escaping Mila's lips, Paisley's eyes widened, a flicker of uncertainty crossing her face. Was the striking resemblance between Courtney, a beloved, heartbreaking memory, and this tiny new life genuine, or merely a trick of her exhaustion and emotional vulnerability?

"Hey, you two!" Sheryl beamed, her voice a soft melody in the serene room, careful not to disturb the sleeping infant in

her arms. "The baby's wide awake for you. Why don't you take a seat? Make yourselves comfortable."

Jordan and Mila moved to a plush couch nestled by the window, the late afternoon sun casting a warm, golden glow into the room, illuminating dust motes dancing in the air. They settled in, a comfortable silence falling between them, punctuated only by the gentle rhythmic beeping of medical equipment and the soft coos of the newborn. It wasn't long before Sheryl approached, her movements careful and deliberate, carrying the tiny bundle of new life like a precious, fragile treasure. Jordan, his heart overflowing with a mixture of awe and tenderness, extended his arms, his hands surprisingly steady as he gently cradled the infant.

"Hello, little one," Jordan whispered, his voice thick with an emotion so profound it nearly choked him. Tears, unbidden and warm, welled in his eyes as he gazed at the tiny, perfect face, a miniature version of a future full of promise. "It's nice to finally get to see you. I'm your uncle Jordan..." His voice trailed off, a soft catch in his throat.

The baby, as if understanding his heartfelt greeting, responded with a soft, innocent smile, a tiny wrinkle appearing at the corner of her lips, a fleeting echo of a deeper connection. Jordan’s tears, no longer held back by any semblance of composure, spilled over, tracing warm paths down his cheeks, each drop a testament to the complex tapestry of grief and joy. Mila, her own eyes glistening, rested her head on his shoulder,

soaking in the profound, peaceful moment, the tangible beginning of a new chapter, a testament to resilience and hope. Sheryl, ever perceptive, glanced at Paisley, subtly tilting her head towards Jordan and Mila, a silent cue for her to speak, to bridge the unspoken question hanging in the air.

"Well?" Sheryl prompted Paisley, her voice hushed but encouraging, her gaze full of gentle expectation. "Are you gonna ask him?"

Jordan, still completely mesmerized by the baby, didn't look up, his attention captivated by the innocent perfection in his arms, every tiny detail of her face etched into his memory. "Ask me what?" he murmured, barely registering the conversation around him, lost in the delicate dance of new life.

Paisley slowly sat up, pushing herself against the pillows, a visible nervousness flickering in her eyes, betraying the vulnerability she felt. "Umm... well, it's about the name for the baby?" Her voice was a soft, uncertain tremor in the quiet room, a fragile question hanging in the air.

Jordan finally looked at her, a dawning realization spreading across his features, clearing the haze of exhaustion and lingering shock. In his tired state, and with everything that had transpired, the urgency of their escape, the close brush with death, he hadn't even thought to ask about the baby's name. "Oh yeah? What are you thinking of naming her?" he asked, his voice gentle and expectant, a warmth infusing his tone.

"I was wondering," Paisley began, her voice still trembling slightly, her gaze flickering between Jordan and the baby, seeking reassurance, "if you would be okay if I named her Courtney Rose?" The name hung in the air, a whisper of a cherished past.

Jordan paused, the air in the room seeming to thicken around him, charged with unspoken emotions. A profound wave of memories washed over him, a cascade of Courtney's infectious laughter, her vibrant presence, the warmth of her hand in his. He remembered their last conversation, the solemn promise he'd made to her, the strange, prescient prophecy she left behind. His silence lingered, thick with emotion, a silent communion with the past.

"I can come up with something else," Paisley continued, mistaking his silence for hesitation or disapproval, her voice tinged with a quiet apology. "But Courtney, she was always really nice to me, and I know how much they mean to you... I just thought..." Her voice trailed off, leaving the unspoken plea hanging.

Jordan's tears, now a steady flow, flowed freely, a silent testament to the love and loss that intertwined with this joyous moment, a beautiful ache in his chest. He leaned down, his lips brushing the baby's soft forehead, a gentle, tender kiss that was both a blessing and a farewell. "It's okay, Paisley. It's a beautiful name," he whispered, his voice choked with emo-

tion, but undeniably sincere, a profound acceptance in his tone.

Sheryl, seizing the poignant moment, her eyes bright with understanding, pulled out her smartphone, her fingers quickly navigating to the camera. The soft click of the shutter captured the raw, beautiful emotion of the scene, a perfect tableau of grief, love, and new beginnings. Jordan, still lost in the depths of the baby's innocent eyes, his heart soaring and aching simultaneously, didn't even notice the lens pointed his way.

"May I hold her?" Mila asked softly, her gaze, filled with a nascent motherly longing, fixed on the tiny infant, a yearning in her eyes that was impossible to ignore.

"Of course, hun," Sheryl replied, her voice warm with affection, a knowing smile playing on her lips, "but are your hands okay? Your arm is still bandaged." She glanced at Mila's bandaged arm, a touch of maternal concern in her voice.

Mila nodded, a small, reassuring smile on her lips, her gaze unwavering from the baby. "I'm fine. It's just a bandage."

"I'll help her," Jordan offered, his voice a gentle hum, his focus now shifting to Mila. He carefully lifted the baby, his uninjured left arm supporting the tiny bundle with practiced tenderness, slowly, almost reverently, moving her into Mila's waiting, eager arms, a silent offering of trust and partnership.

"She's beautiful, Paisley," Mila smiled, her gaze softening further, a profound connection forming between her and the newborn, a silent promise of care and affection blossoming in her heart. She held the baby close, inhaling the sweet, powdery scent of new life, a quiet sigh of contentment escaping her lips, as if the missing piece of her own life had finally found its place in the tender weight of the infant in her arms. A gentle warmth spread through her, a feeling she hadn't known was missing until this very moment.

"Thank you, Mila," Paisley replied, her voice filled with relief and gratitude, a fragile exhaustion etched on her face but overshadowed by the pure joy radiating from her.

Jordan, his heart swelling with a love he barely recognized, admired the sheer beauty reflected in Mila's smile, a quiet awe settling over him. He fell deeper in love with the inherent motherly gaze she held for baby Courtney, a tenderness that transformed her. He nudged her gently with his shoulder, a playful, loving gesture that spoke volumes without words.

"You ever think about having one?" he whispered, his voice low and intimate, the question hanging in the air between them, ripe with unspoken dreams and the burgeoning possibilities of their shared future. His eyes searched hers, a hopeful flicker within their depths.

Mila grinned, her eyes sparkling with a mischievous light and a deep affection. "Yes, my love. One day..." she replied, her voice soft and full of promise, a secret garden of future hopes blooming in her tone.

"One day," Jordan echoed, his voice equally soft, a shared dream blossoming between them in the quiet hospital room, a silent pact sealed in the hushed intimacy of the moment. The air around them seemed to thicken with unspoken desires and a profound sense of togetherness.

Sheryl, ever attuned to the needs of those around her, especially her son, gently set her phone aside. She noticed Jordan starting to nod off, his head drooping slightly, the immense strain of the past few days finally catching up to him. "Maybe you should get back to your room, bud. You've been through a lot... you need to rest," she suggested, her voice kind and firm, laced with genuine concern.

Both Jordan and Mila nodded in agreement, recognizing the truth in her words. "She is right, Jordan. We should go back to bed," Mila said, a playful wink towards Jordan making him blush, a flicker of their usual banter breaking through the emotional moment, a lighthearted touch to the profound experience they had just shared.

Sheryl rolled her eyes good-naturedly, but a playful smile touched her lips as she carefully took the baby back into her arms, cradling the tiny bundle with practiced ease. "Alright,

get out of here, you two," she said, a clear dismissal veiled in affection, her tone warm and teasing.

Mila, ever attentive and supportive, helped Jordan to his feet, her hand supporting his elbow, a silent offer of strength. She guided him towards Paisley, who was still in bed, looking tired but content, a gentle smile playing on her lips as she watched them. They both reached out, embracing her in a shared moment of congratulation and affection, a silent acknowledgment of the new chapter in her life.

"Congrats, kid," Jordan whispered, a touch of his usual sarcastic wit in his voice, a familiar comfort in his tone. "It'll only get harder from here."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Paisley replied sarcastically, mirroring his tone with a tired but amused smile. Jordan chuckled, a genuine, hearty laugh escaping him, a sound of pure relief and happiness as he began to walk out of the room. Sheryl, meanwhile, gently placed the baby in the sterile white hospital bassinet beside Paisley's bed, ensuring the newborn was safe and comfortable.

"Hey, Mom..." Jordan slowly turned to look at his mother, who seemed genuinely surprised he was addressing her, a flicker of unspoken tension dissolving between them, replaced by a fragile hope. "I'm sorry... about before. But, thank you for being there." His voice was sincere, a raw apology and heartfelt gratitude, a bridge finally being built between them.

Sheryl smiled, her eyes softening, a profound understanding passing between them, a silent forgiveness. "It's okay, bud. I messed up earlier, but I understand why you did what you did," she said, her voice filled with a mother's unconditional love, a balm to his wounded spirit. She then glanced towards Mila, a knowing look in her eyes, a silent message of approval and wisdom. "You hold on to that one, and treat her right. She's perfect for you... a truly special woman."

Jordan looked at Mila, a wide, genuine smile spreading across his face, a testament to the profound happiness she brought into his life, a light that had chased away his shadows. "I'm willing to hang on as long as she's willing to put up with me," he joked, his left arm wrapping securely around Mila, a protective and loving embrace that spoke of his devotion, as he took hold of his IV pole with his right hand. They left the room, their footsteps echoing softly in the quiet corridor, a rhythmic counterpoint to the quiet joy they carried, leaving Sheryl to tend to the new mother and her precious baby, a scene of quiet domesticity after the storm.

Moments later, as Jordan and Mila walked slowly back towards his hospital room in the trauma ward, the hushed silence of the corridor broken only by the soft squeak of his IV pole, a surprise visitor awaited them by the door – Dr. Angela Martin. Her presence, unexpected and bright, brought a jolt of pleasant surprise, a familiar and welcome face in the sterile environment.

"Dr. Martin?" Jordan exclaimed, his eyes widening in disbelief and delight, a genuine smile replacing his weariness. "What are you doing here? I thought you were on leave!"

"Jordan!" Angela beamed, her face lighting up with genuine pleasure, her usually calm demeanor replaced by an infectious enthusiasm. She walked over to them, her arms open, openly embracing both Jordan and Mila in a warm, friendly hug, her embrace a tangible expression of her care. "I had a bit of a slow day today, so when I heard through the grapevine you were awake and doing well, I'd thought I'd come see you!" Her enthusiasm was infectious, filling the quiet corridor with a welcome burst of energy. "And it's wonderful to see you up and about, Jordan!" she added, her gaze lingering on him with a professional yet personal concern.

Mila, ever polite, extended her hand, a graceful gesture. "It's nice to meet you," she said, a small smile playing on her lips.

Angela shook Mila's hand warmly, her grip firm and friendly. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Mila. Jordan talked so much about you, I feel like I already know you!" she replied, a mischievous twinkle in her eye, hinting at the depth of Jordan's affection.

“Shall we get ourselves a bit more comfortable in the room then?” Jordan suggested, a hint of exhaustion creeping into

his voice, yet still radiating happiness. The ordeal he'd been through, the miraculous awakening, and the emotional reunion with Mila had taken their toll, but a profound sense of peace had settled over him.

"Oh yeah, of course. You must be exhausted," Angela agreed, her tone shifting immediately to one of loving concern. She gently ushered Jordan and Mila inside Jordan's bright, clean hospital room, the soft hum of medical equipment a comforting backdrop rather than an oppressive one.

Mila, ever attentive, helped Jordan carefully back into the crisp white sheets of his hospital bed, adjusting his pillows with practiced ease. Once he was settled, she pulled a chair close to his side, her hand instinctively finding his and lacing their fingers together. Dr. Martin, with a warm smile, pulled another chair even closer to the bed, creating a small, intimate circle. The air in the room, previously thick with unspoken anxieties, now felt light and hopeful, filled with the quiet strength of shared understanding and renewed possibility.

"So, Angela," Jordan began, his voice still a little hoarse, but gaining strength, "how did you know I was awake?" A flicker of curiosity danced in his eyes, a welcome distraction from the lingering shadows of his recent past.

Angela chuckled softly, a familiar twinkle in her gaze. "Well, I sometimes help fill in with the psychological staff here at the hospital when I'm not at my practice. It's a way to stay

connected to the medical community and, frankly, I enjoy the change of pace." She paused, her smile widening. "After what happened, I made a point of asking a couple of the nurses to update me if something, anything, changed with you. I had a feeling, you know? A strong sense that you'd pull through." Her words conveyed not just professional diligence, but genuine personal investment.

"Wow. Busy lady," Jordan teased, a weak but genuine smile gracing his lips. The easy camaraderie between them, even after all this time and the devastating events, was a balm to his soul, a reminder of the enduring connections that anchored him.

Dr. Martin chuckled too, rolling her eyes playfully. "True. But if anyone has kept me the busiest lately, it's been involving you two. Honestly, the medical reports, the consultations, the... well, the whole whirlwind. It's been quite something." She glanced at her watch, a hint of regret in her expression. "I can't stay long, unfortunately, but how are you both holding up? Truly." Her gaze swept between Jordan and Mila, a genuine concern etched on her features.

"It has been hard to comprehend, everything," Mila admitted, her voice soft and tinged with a lingering vulnerability. She squeezed Jordan's hand, seeking and offering comfort. "The shock, the grief, the uncertainty... it's been a lot to process." Jordan, understanding her unspoken pain, placed his free hand gently on her shoulder, a gesture of profound

comfort and solidarity. Mila covered it with her own, a silent affirmation of their bond, a testament to the strength they found in each other.

"I can imagine, sweetie," Angela said, her gaze then shifting to Jordan, her expression softening even further. "What about you, Jordan? How are you feeling, now that you're back among us?"

He shrugged, a sigh escaping his lips, heavy with unspoken burdens. "Honestly... I don't know what to say. It's just moving so fast since I woke up. After what happened, waking up to find out another one of my best friends is dead, and the whole... you know..." He trailed off, the weight of the past few days momentarily pressing down on him, his voice thick with unexpressed emotion. "The two main things that kept me calm were seeing Mila, and meeting my niece, little Paisley." He paused, then his voice dropped to a near whisper, a profound revelation in his tone, a fragile truth offered into the stillness of the room. "And... seeing Courtney."

Both Dr. Martin and Mila gasped, a wave of shock rippling through the small room, disrupting the calm. Their eyes widened, disbelief and a flicker of awe evident on their faces as they processed the impossible statement.

"You saw Courtney? How?" Angela pressed, leaning forward, her professional curiosity momentarily overcoming her

personal surprise, her voice a hushed urgency. The air crackled with anticipation, waiting for his explanation.

Tears, hot and sudden, welled in Jordan's eyes, a fresh wave of emotion washing over him, mirroring the intensity of the memory. He took a moment, gathering himself, steeling his resolve, before continuing. "While I was out. It was right after I passed out in the basement, after... after everything went dark." His voice was thick with emotion, but there was an undeniable certainty in his words, a conviction that transcended logic. "She was dressed in this angelic white dress, glowing almost. And she wasn't alone." He took a deep, shaky breath, the memory vivid and real, as if she stood before him still. "There was a little girl with her, like three years old."

Mila, already tearful, covered her mouth with a trembling hand, fresh tears streaming down her face, the realization dawning on her, a poignant understanding blooming in her heart. Even Dr. Martin struggled to compose herself, her professional demeanor momentarily faltering as a profound sense of wonder washed over her, an inexplicable beauty in the face of such loss.

"It was Rose," Jordan continued, his voice thick with an overwhelming surge of love and grief and joy, a complex tapestry of emotions intertwining. "I... I finally got to hold my baby girl." His voice cracked with the weight of that impossible, beautiful moment, a dream fulfilled beyond all hope. The touch of her tiny hand in his, the soft curve of her cheek

against his, were more real than anything he had ever experienced in his waking life. A warmth, both searing and comforting, spread through his chest, dispelling the lingering chill of years of sorrow. "She and her mom said that they wanted me to promise something. Promise to be the man Courtney fell in love with, that Mila fell in love with. To live, truly live, and to be happy." A faint, almost ethereal smile touched his lips, a reflection of the profound peace he'd found in that ethereal reunion, a peace that settled deep into his bones. "She also said that she and Rose would still be with me and that I will find proof soon enough. And then... then guess what Paisley decided to name her baby? Courtney Rose..." He trailed off, the name hanging in the air, a miraculous echo of love and legacy, solidifying the impossible truth of his vision, a testament to the enduring power of family and connection.

Mila broke down in loving tears, completely overwhelmed by the profound sentiment in Jordan's story, the cosmic alignment of events too beautiful to be mere coincidence. Her own heart swelled with a mixture of awe and relief, witnessing the visible transformation in the man she loved. She clung to Jordan's hand, her body trembling with the intensity of her emotions, her fingers intertwining with his as if to ground herself in the unbelievable reality unfolding before them. Dr. Martin, ever the professional, took a moment to process the information, her mind racing to reconcile the spiritual with the scientific, her eyes betraying a hint of wonder and a deep understanding of the human spirit, before she spoke.

"We may not be in a formal session, Jordan, but would you like to know what I think?" Angela asked, a gentle smile shining through her own unshed tears, her voice filled with a gentle wisdom that transcended the confines of her professional role.

Jordan nodded, extending his arms to Mila. She gratefully curled into his embrace, finding comfort and solace in his warmth, resting her head on his shoulder as if finding a safe harbor after a long, turbulent storm. Their shared tears were not of sorrow, but of release and profound understanding, a cleansing deluge that washed away years of pain and uncertainty.

"I think this... vision, if you will, is a sign that 'El Gran Cabron' didn't survive the attack that night," Angela mused, her gaze thoughtful, her words carefully chosen to convey a sense of closure and liberation. "That evil, that darkness, it's gone. But the man, Jordan Lambert, is truly set to thrive – whoever he may become. It goes without saying your old skills, and some of your habits, may linger. They are a part of you, etched into your very being. But could you say you finally have the closure you need to move on? To step into a new chapter, unburdened by the past? To embrace the man you are meant to be?"

Jordan simply smiled, a genuine, radiant smile that reached his eyes, illuminating his entire face with a newfound peace, gently squeezing Mila's hand. "I think you're right..."

The weight that had settled on his shoulders for so long, the crushing burden of grief and guilt, had finally begun to lift, replaced by a lightness he hadn't felt in years, as if a profound exhale had finally released all his burdens.

Dr. Martin winked, a playful glint in her eyes as she checked her watch, her movements fluid and efficient. “Of course, I am.” She stood up, adjusting her outfit with a graceful movement, a picture of professional poise. “Now, like I said, I can’t stay long. My other patients, and a mountain of paperwork, await. But I’m very happy to say that the man I see before me is not the same as who came into my office over two years ago.

“You’ve come a long way, Jordan, a truly remarkable journey, and you still have a long way to still heal. But you’re on the right path, a path that will lead you to wholeness and happiness. When you’re ready to get back into the world... Or if either one of you needs someone to talk to, someone to help navigate the complexities of life, you know where to find me, Jordan!” Her voice was filled with warmth and genuine affection, a testament to the bond they had forged over countless therapy sessions.

Dr. Martin waved goodbye as she stepped out of the room, her presence leaving behind a lingering sense of peace and hope, a quiet assurance that everything would be alright, leaving Jordan and Mila to enjoy some much-needed time alone. The quiet hum of the hospital room became a comforting

backdrop to their reunion, a symphony of healing and renewed hope. But before she fully exited, her head popped back in, a sudden thought striking her, a final, beautiful revelation.

"Oh! By the way, Jordan, I almost forgot. Caleb's wife is expecting a baby boy. They were thinking of naming him Jordan." She smiled, a soft, knowing look on her face, a silent acknowledgment of the impact he had on those around him, before finally disappearing down the hallway, leaving behind a profound sense of awe and gratitude.

Jordan sat up straighter in the bed, a look of profound surprise and humility on his face, his mind reeling from the weight of the news. "I didn't know..." His voice was a whisper, a mixture of shock and gratitude, the implications of this tribute settling deep within his heart.

"I know. I've been working with the family since the funeral, helping them through their grief," Angela admitted, a touch of sadness in her voice, acknowledging the delicate nature of the information she was sharing. "It's not my place to share this, really, it was a private conversation." She met his gaze, her expression gentle, her eyes conveying a deep understanding of the sacred trust placed in her. "But I thought you'd should know. It's a testament to the man you are, Jordan. A true legacy, one that will live on through the lives you've touched and the love you've inspired."

10

Rebirth

Dr. Martin slowly navigated her SUV out of the hospital parking lot, the tires crunching softly on the gravel. The evening air, carrying a crisp, refreshing chill, felt like a cleansing balm against the lingering, stale warmth of the hospital building. A profound, almost overwhelming sense of relief settled over her, a quiet but firm internal confirmation that Jordan, despite the grave danger he had faced, had decisively crossed the threshold out of his immediate peril. This relief was complex, laced with the bittersweet realization of the cost of his recovery.

As she drove, the vibrant, sinking sun cast long, dramatic shadows across the asphalt road, a visual echo of the profound and layered thoughts occupying her mind. She reached mechanically for her smartphone, the glowing screen a connection to a past she had kept hidden. Her thumbs, guided by a practiced, quick rhythm, began to dance across the glass, composing a message that was both a confession and a heartfelt

farewell to the son she had given up years ago. Every tap was a release, every word a tender, long-overdue utterance.

Dear Caleb, she began, her gaze intently fixed on the screen, the world outside her car momentarily fading. *I went to visit your friend Jordan today, a young man who fought so valiantly for his life. It was a harrowing experience, Caleb, seeing him so vulnerable, so close to the edge, yet simultaneously so incredibly strong and resilient. It is a deep regret that I only discovered your friendship so recently. Perhaps, had I possessed that knowledge sooner, I could have somehow intervened, could have subtly or directly helped steer the course of events into a more favorable outcome—one where you, my brave boy, would still be here with us, where your future wasn't so tragically cut short.*

But I am coming to accept that fate, in its often-cruel and mysterious way, brings each of us precisely to where we are meant to be. And you, Caleb, were undeniably meant to be a hero—a brilliant beacon of selfless courage in a world that, now more than ever, is desperately in need of such light. Your sacrifice will not be forgotten.

There are so many unsaid things I long to tell you, so many profound truths I've held guarded and close to my heart for far too long, secrets that felt impossible to speak while you were here. I wish more than anything that I could have been able to tell you who I truly am to you, how immensely, immeasurably proud I am of the extraordinary man you grew to be. Your courage in the face of danger, your deep compassion for others, your unwa-

vering and bright spirit—they shone with an incandescent glow, illuminating even the darkest corners of your life. But for now, I must settle for the quiet, profound privilege of watching over your son, my grandson, when he finally makes his way into this world. I promise you, Caleb, I will make sure he knows the magnificent legacy you left behind. I will tell him that his daddy was a true, genuine hero, and that he did absolutely everything within his power to see his son born, to fiercely protect the future that was meant to be his and theirs. I pray, with all my soul, that you are finally at peace, wherever your spirit resides, and that, in some cosmic way, you can find it in your heart to forgive me for not telling you the truth of your birth sooner. It was not easy giving you up when you were born; it was a decision that has weighed relentlessly, a heavy stone upon my soul for all these years. Yet, seeing the remarkable, selfless man you ultimately became, seeing the lives you profoundly touched and the incredible impact you made on this world, helps me find a measure of peace, a quiet rest in the certainty that I made the right choice, difficult and heartbreaking as it was. I hope, in some way, in some distant place beyond the veil of this life, to see you again, to embrace you once more, my son.

With all my enduring love, Your Mother.

Dr. Martin slowly closed her smartphone, the screen fading to black. She placed it deliberately on the passenger seat, the device feeling heavier than its weight, now holding the tangible form of her most difficult confession. The significant, unspoken burden she had carried for decades, now finally

committed to digital ink, seemed to physically lift from her shoulders, allowing her to breathe deeper. She started her SUV, the powerful engine humming to life, and began to drive away, leaving the hospital, with its sterile air and somber memories of near-loss and final-loss, firmly behind her.

Meanwhile, in the hushed, deeply private confines of the trauma ward, a profound, intimate quiet had settled over Jordan and Mila. They lay together on the narrow hospital bed, their bodies intertwined, their gazes locked on one another, each lost deep within the boundless, unspoken affection and profound connection they had discovered amidst the chaos. Jordan gently leaned his forehead against Mila's, their eyes closing in perfect, intimate synchronicity, a silent, powerful testament to the new, fragile, and fierce bond that had been forged between them.

"Mila," Jordan whispered, his voice thin, barely audible, yet thick with deep, raw emotion and the exhaustion of his ordeal. "There's something I... I've been needing to ask you..."

Mila smiled, her eyes still blissfully shut, savoring the warmth, the solid presence, and the sheer miracle of his breathing body beside her. "What is it, my love?" she murmured back, her voice a soft, beautiful melody, like a lullaby after a terrible storm.

Jordan opened his eyes, their gazes instantly meeting again, a deep, silent promise passing like an electric current between

them. "I know we haven't known each other for very long, and I know it absolutely doesn't have to be right away, not with everything we've just been through," he began, his voice tired but earnest, filled with a raw, undeniable honesty that mirrored the vulnerability in his eyes. "But with everything that's happened... with all the chaos, the fear, the life-and-death stakes we've faced together, side-by-side, I've fallen completely, irrevocably in love with you. After Courtney died, I honestly believed—I *knew*—that I couldn't possibly love anyone else, that the deepest part of my heart was irrevocably broken, shattered beyond repair. But, seeing you here, next to me, now... seeing your unimaginable strength, your inherent kindness, your fiery, unwavering spirit... I know, with absolute, soul-deep certainty, that it's time for me to finally be the man I was truly meant to be, a man capable of loving deeply again, capable of building a future, not just surviving the past. And I need to know, Mila, will you be there with me? Will you walk this extraordinary path, hand-in-hand, right by my side?"

Mila's fingers, trembling slightly, brushed the very tips of her fingers against Jordan's stubbled cheek, her touch feather-light, yet saturated with overwhelming tenderness and conviction. "I already told you," she said softly, her voice brimming with quiet, fierce resolve, "no matter what happens, no matter what monumental challenges or unbelievable dangers we have to face in this life, we will be strong, *together*, my Sunshine."

Jordan smiled gently, a genuine, heartfelt smile that reached the depths of his tired eyes, erasing the shadows of

pain and fear. "Well, my sweetest, most beautiful Moonlight," he whispered, his voice a tender caress that sent shivers down her spine, "I have just one more, very important question."

Mila's smile widened, her eyes opening, seeming to shimmer and reflect the incandescent joy that Jordan's loving remarks sparked deep within her. As Jordan mouthed something to her, a silent, profound question forming clearly on his lips, a message so unmistakable that a skilled lip-reader might decipher it with practiced ease, her jaw dropped in astonishment. Her breath suddenly caught painfully in her throat, stealing her ability to speak.

Will you marry me? he silently conveyed, the unspoken words echoing loudly, resonating with thunderous clarity in the quiet, charged air of the small hospital room.

Mila quickly covered her open mouth with her bandaged hand, tears of pure, unadulterated joy—tears that had been held back by fear and trauma—finally, gloriously, free to stream down her face, a torrent of absolute happiness. Unable to form a single, coherent word, completely overwhelmed by the sudden, profound rush of emotion and the weight of his question, she nodded her head excitedly, a fervent, enthusiastic, and decisive agreement. Then, with a joyful, choked sob, she leaned in, closing the distance, and kissed Jordan passionately, a kiss that sealed their unspoken vows and promised a lifetime of shared strength, unwavering love, and a future built on the foundation of their surviving hearts.

Dakota Frandsen, recognized professionally as the "Specialist of the Strange," is a distinguished figure encompassing the roles of author, poet, musician, entrepreneur, and experienced paranormal investigator. His work rigorously probes the limits of perception and reality through the synthesis of artistic and scientific methodologies. Mr. Frandsen's professional endeavors are principally focused on establishing a concrete correlation between extraordinary phenomena and empirical understanding.

His profoundly diverse academic and professional foundation, which includes studies in psychology, forensic investigation, archaeology, artificial intelligence, literature, music composition, filmmaking, graphic design, and business administration, serves as the basis for his methodological approach. This approach facilitates the analysis of anomalous occurrences through both scientific and creative paradigms. Mr. Frandsen's engagement with the unexplained commenced at the age of 14, and his sustained intellectual curiosity has subsequently led to international research involving cryptids, documented Unidentified Flying Object (UFO) sightings, and numerous haunted locales. This extensive investigative foundation informs his creative and analytical scholarly contributions.

His substantial literary portfolio includes the multi-volume memoir *I Am the Specialist of the Strange*, the interdisciplinary scholarly work *The Field of Consciousness*, and the practical reference guide *A Journal to Strange*. In 2022, he founded Bald and Bonkers Network LLC, a multimedia production and distribution company where he holds the position of Chief Executive Officer. The company is dedicated to providing a platform for individuals to share unconventional narratives and embrace their distinct experiences through published works, podcasts, musical compositions, and educational courses. Whether engaged in composition, literary creation, or investigation, Dakota Frandsen's overarching objective is to proactively encourage all individuals to articulate and disseminate their

personal narratives, irrespective of the perceived strangeness or inherent complexity of the experience.